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AXIS MUNDI

SARAH CROSSLAND

after Lisa Russ Spaar

Beneath the jacaranda—blue as a breath lost
to a kiss, acoustic paint—the light

like a muscle lifts my hand, and I'm a child
again: in our gymnasium, courting

the maypole, polished pine climbed
over with crepe—festoon, filet lace,

greenery—a hundred plaits in our faithful
fists. I wind mine as if tying

a rhyme around a song—the cassette
tape of a brass band flickers and in

the lacuna, barefoot and bows, I claim
the color for my eyes: carnelian, moss

and citrus, binding rose—I did not know
what to worship then, what was beastly

and what a lie. Laureate, I held my scar-
red ribbon taut, and in the current

of girls walked—withershins,
unraveling—to where I had already been.

ON WHAT IS IN OUR POWER

JESSICA WRIGHT

My grandmother died alone on a Sunday at about four-thirty in the morning, between the rounds of the night nurse. Being in Texas, I found out a few minutes before midnight on the Saturday, when my father texted from Europe to ask if he could call. We rarely call one another spontaneously, and my grandmother had been in the hospital for about three months, so it was clear to me what he was calling about. "Dorothy has died," he said. I responded according to family habit—calm affect, *thank you for letting me know*—and kept the phone call under three minutes.

The next day, my mother started texting. My phone bloomed with photographs of my grandmother—with my sibling, with me, in her car, in her chair, in bed, in hiking boots, standing next to the piano where she had hidden the frying pan, in her nurse's uniform at my birth—each a reminder that she was gone. I muted my phone. Like ghosts half desired, the images kept arriving.

I was clearing out my office at the university. The World Health Organization had just announced that COVID-19 was officially a pandemic and the campus was closing down. I had to call through to security to enter any of the buildings, and when I did get inside, there was silence everywhere. I carried plastic crates beneath the buzz of strip lights in empty corridors. My back pocket was fat with torn-up napkins, and I used one scrap of napkin to open each new door.

Inside my office, I squirted hand sanitizer into my palms until they cracked open into parchment codices. I packed up the printer paper and the pencils, the stapler, the hand cream, two bags of unsalted almonds, one

box of stale crackers, a handful of chocolates left over from trivia, and two half-used boxes of tissues, suddenly precious. I emptied out the mini-fridge, keeping only the three single-serve sachets of long-life milk I'd saved from aeroplane meals. When there was no milk left on the shelves, I thought, my future self would thank me. Finally, I filled four grocery bags with books that I knew I would never read, even during the two or three months I imagined the pandemic would allow me to stay locked inside my home.

Perhaps the least useful among them: Plato's *Phaedrus*; Porphyry's *To Gaurus on How Embryos Are Ensouled and On What Is in Our Power*; Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

* * *

Porphyry's *To Gaurus on How Embryos Are Ensouled and On What Is in Our Power* is in fact two separate books, and it is possible that neither was written by Porphyry himself. The first, *To Gaurus on How Embryos Are Ensouled*, is a letter about how life begins. The central question of the text is whether embryos are actually plants—and, if so, what the transformation is that makes them animals, at what point they become human. According to the remains of the medieval manuscript in which it is preserved, *To Gaurus* was written by the ancient medical author Galen, but nowadays this is thought to be false, and the work is generally attributed to the late antique philosopher Porphyry, who was a student of Plotinus, an influential Neoplatonist mystic. Porphyry famously desired to fulfil the Platonist dictum that *philosophy is the practice of death* by killing himself. It was Plotinus who convinced him to live.

On What Is in Our Power survives only in fragments. It appears to be a commentary on an earlier philosophical text, Plato's *Myth of Er*, which tells the story of a man who visits the afterlife and comes back to report a lottery system of reincarnation: souls step forward according to the number on their ticket and select a body from among those still available for their next life—swan, eagle, woman, poor man, king, and so forth. *On What Is in Our Power* considers the extent to which individual souls have real power to determine their future embodiment. How far does the choice of a body type carry us?

Ancient philosophers were constantly trying to eliminate their own gross materiality and raise themselves up to the higher plane of reason.

Porphyry opens his biography of his teacher with the following statement: "Plotinus the philosopher, who lived among us, seemed ashamed of being in a body." I wonder what body Porphyry and Plotinus thought they might have chosen for their next life. For some reason I am fixed on the idea of a cloud.

Beneath Porphyry's discussion of reincarnation, however, is a more literary question: How useful are stories in reconciling us to death? The fifth-century anthologist John Stobaeus, who preserves the fragments of Porphyry's text, comments that "fiction is in a way natural, because even nature likes to hide." That is to say, the stories we make up about reality have an element of truth in them, since reality itself operates through symbols and misdirection. This is especially true when it comes to spirituality: the power of sacred rites, Stobaeus concludes, is rooted in concealment, in particular, the use of ambiguous language and the unravelling of secrets through fictions and dreams.

* * *

My great-grandfather, Harry, was a table blade forger, which is to say, he made knives. In Sheffield, where my father's family is from, they would have called him a *little mester*, a craftsman who rented space on a factory floor. He was the son of a shoemaker, but his father died when he was a child, so he trained to make knives instead.

All of this I learned from my father during the week following my grandmother's death. I was walking the mile loop around the lake close to my house in San Antonio, where people were using the outdoor exercise equipment, and where basketballs still thudded and jarred in the courts. My father was sitting at his window, looking over the mountains in Andorra and forbidden from going outside. "I've been doing some research into Dad's side of the family," he said. "I think that it's a love story."

I stepped onto the wet grass and carved a wide arc around the teenagers that were walking toward me, hauling two poodles. One of the dogs stopped on the path, stared at me, then lunged, barking.

"You're outside?" my father said. "Is that allowed?"

"This is Texas." I walked further into the grass. "Gun shops are considered essential businesses. Yes, I am allowed in the park."

"According to her birth certificate, Harry's mother, Mary Ann

Wilkinson, wasn't from Sheffield after all. She was from Lincoln. When she was sixteen years old, she married a Mr. John Paine and had a child shortly after. This was well before the legal age of marriage in the eighteen hundreds."

I wanted to tell him that this was probably not a love story. Then I remembered that he had just lost his mother and I said nothing. Rainwater, gathered in the grass, soaked through my sneakers and into the cuffs of my jeans.

"They moved to Sheffield—probably to avoid the scandal of the pregnancy—and John Paine died eight or nine years later. Mary Ann Wilkinson was widowed at the tender age of twenty-five."

Families stood around grills, turning meat. A man looked over at a child who was learning to fish and called out, *Don't let the line break. Don't let the line break!*

My father said, "She married Henry Wright almost immediately. And do you know what is interesting? He was from Lincoln also. So what I reckon is, Henry Wright was sweet on Mary Ann Wilkinson when they were teenagers. She got pregnant and married John Paine. When Paine died, Henry Wright came to Sheffield and married her."

A heron flapped out of the grass, its wings as slow as facts. "That sounds like a plausible interpretation."

"My grandfather would have been a shoemaker, like his father before him," my father said. "In those days, you wouldn't go to university to become a shoemaker. You'd learn the trade from your father." For the first time, I caught a glimpse of wistfulness in his voice. "The reason Harry Wright didn't become a shoemaker was that his father was dead. My theory is that he was sent to live with family, and that's how he got into making knives."

* * *

People in my father's family treat emotions as toxic substances that we bottle up and bury underground in order to avoid poisoning everybody. We work hard and study hard and the women become anorexic. My father researched family history because it was easier than thinking about his mother's death. My grandmother hid the frying pan inside the piano because she couldn't stomach the smell of hot oil. I am writing this essay instead of talking to my family about the fact that someone cut down the tree on which we all were branches.

Whenever I stayed with my grandmother during my twenties, we silently competed to eat the least. The first time I noticed this was the autumn after I got out of rehab, thirty pounds heavier and newly aware of my own brittle bones. I still wasn't menstruating, but there was a thick band of flesh around my waist and the reservoirs in my clavicles were filling out. A drought was breaking in me, and water pooled between us like a question that I could not broach. Every pound that I gained was a rejection of our bond.

My grandmother was already frail enough that she needed me to serve dinner. She said, "Don't give me any stodge." So I put three baby potatoes on the edge of her plate. "You can leave what you don't want," I said, but I didn't mean it. Holding her right wrist steady with her left hand, she picked up each of the potatoes from her plate and deposited them onto mine.

My grandmother never pressured me to starve myself. To the contrary, she wanted me to eat all the food in the house while she picked the crumbs from the cheese knife and nibbled at a handful of grapes. In imitation of her, I wanted the same: that she would eat while I learned to starve. It is a central irony of anorexia that the fierce sensation of flight that restriction can offer makes it difficult to give the love that we crave, that is to say, the very kind of love whose absence so often motivates anorexia in the first place. We craved love, and so we starved ourselves of love in order to prove to ourselves that we did not need love. As a consequence, we couldn't offer one another—or ourselves, especially ourselves—the kind of love that we craved. This was the cycle.

Nine years later, and a month before she died, I flew to England and spent a day at the hospital where my grandmother was recovering from a hip fracture, followed by pneumonia, followed by a bout of C. diff that ripped out her insides. She was alone in an isolation ward with two sinks, three chairs stacked clumsily together, and a rolling table. On the table was all the paraphernalia of hospital visits over the years: a book of crossword and sudoku puzzles, a plastic beaker filled with watered-down tea, a box of tissues, a plastic container filled with digestive biscuits, and a large, unopened bar of Galaxy chocolate.

My father was there also, visiting from Andorra. He showed me how to peel apart the plastic gown and handed me gloves from the cardboard box fixed to the wall beside the door. He leaned forward in his chair and said in

a loud, slow voice, "Dorothy has been writing a few sentences with me each day, haven't you, Dorothy."

She blinked at him from the plastic-coated armchair. At length she said, "I want to get back in the bed."

My father called for a nurse, and we left the room for lunch. When we returned, my father said, "Did you eat your sandwich today, Dorothy?"

"I did." She was lying in bed now, raised slightly by the mint green hospital pillow. Her feet were naked and swollen on top of the sheets.

"How was the bread, Dorothy?" He glanced at me: "I don't let her get away with it."

The corners of her mouth turned down. "I didn't eat the bread." She shuffled up a little straighter and her eyes fixed on me. "It makes me feel too full, like I'm choking. Don't you feel the same?"

I paused over this. "Sometimes it feels like what is choking me is the food."

She didn't say anything. When I replay this moment, I wonder if it was worth it to keep needling her toward our image of wellness, all the way through to the end.

* * *

The day before my grandmother died, my uncle visited her in the ward. When I called, he answered on my grandmother's iPad and held the screen up to her face so that she and I could see one another. I said something bright and cheery. Her words came out like slugs.

"You called just a little too late," my uncle said. "She's just taken diazepam to help her sleep." When I didn't say anything, he added, "She's drowning in her own lungs. Diazepam calms the panic."

My grandmother was notorious for refusing medicine, especially anything that might alter her mental state. When I visited her in hospital some eleven years before her death, in the days following her first stroke, she tucked her pain meds inside used tissues and stuffed them down the sides of her mattress. If you'd asked me then, I would have said she was afraid of losing control of her emotions; now I think that beyond anything else she was afraid of losing control of her words.

An hour after the diazepam, a nurse entered with a tray that had on it a plastic beaker filled with tomato soup, an egg salad sandwich, and a pot

of vanilla ice cream, the kind my grandmother used to buy for me during intervals at the theatre. "She's been waiting for her tea," my uncle said to the nurse. He propped me up on the side table. "She's stayed awake for that vanilla ice cream."

I sat on my couch in San Antonio and watched my grandmother chug the entire beaker of tomato soup, then peel the bread off her sandwich. My kitten leapt onto the couch beside me, curled up, and closed its eyes.

"Can I help you with that?" My uncle spooned the filling to her lips. "I don't think this is egg salad at all," he said. "I think it's cheese." I waited for my grandmother to refuse the cheese—*too greasy for me*—and when she continued eating without commentary, I felt unexpected nostalgia. Anticipatory grief for the home of her words, a cage large enough for both of us.

When my uncle opened the ice cream, I thought of the Viennetta that I could always count on finding in my grandmother's freezer when I stayed with her as a child. Soft vanilla ice cream interleaved with sheets of chocolate, served on a plate. My grandmother, sucking on a single olive at dinner. The sherry glass hidden beneath her bed in the night. Chocolate wrappers under her pillow.

My grandmother ate the tub of ice cream, and then she looked at the camera and said, "Goodbye."

I looked away from the camera, picked up the kitten, and said, "Look, here's Theo." He struggled in my hands as I held him in front of my face.

My uncle leaned in close. "What is Theo?"

"He's an Alsatian," my grandmother said.

* * *

Perhaps her mind was breaking apart like an ice floe. Or maybe it was just the diazepam. She wasn't one for silliness.

Then again, she'd never been one for tears. Yet, in the last decade of her life, my grandmother surprised us both by crying every time I saw her. This wasn't only because she had one weepy eye and a tissue constantly on hand. To my mind, trained by her, old age brought an encroaching sentimentality. I didn't know what to do when she cried. I was always about to leave. I would hug her awkwardly and try not to snap any bones.

During my early life, I was the only grandchild and she was the only

grandparent, and for a long time I wanted to be her. If I write now with specificity of words, it is because she was always completing crossword puzzles, and I could never keep up. If I skip dinner, it is because she used to load my plate with food and then lift a cup of weak, black tea to her lips. Every time I squeeze grief back down my throat, I am playacting her in the best way I know how.

When I was eight years old, my grandmother gave me a dress. We were standing in her bedroom, which was usually forbidden to me. She was clearing out her wardrobe, and she handed me the dress on its hanger. It was a winter fabric, thick and soft, dyed deep purples and reds. There were long sleeves that puffed slightly before closing at the cuffs. There was a collar and a sash. It wasn't that I loved the dress. What glided through me as I wriggled into it and let my grandmother zip up the back was the feeling of closeness to her, and to history. By wearing her clothes, I could live her past, which meant that I could understand mine.

I like to think of my grandmother's final line—*He's an Alsatian*—as a gentle acknowledgement of the breakdown in meaning that death calls forth—this breakdown in meaning that my grandmother so feared and that I, in my desire to become her, have feared also.

* * *

In his infancy, so my father told me, my great-grandfather Harry lived above the Greyhound Public House on Gibraltar Street in the centre of Sheffield. No images of the Greyhound, which has since been demolished, remain. A discount furniture shop now stands in its lot. Before the furniture store, there was a bra factory.

According to *Reminisces of Old Sheffield*, which was written by a local historian in the late eighteen hundreds, the scissor grinders used to hold trade union meetings at the Greyhound. I know this because *Reminisces* contains a story about their exploits. Once, the scissor grinders came out of their meeting to find the watchman Tommy Hotbread asleep in his watch box. They stole a clothesline from a front garden, tied Tommy up, and dumped him, watch box and all, "into the goit in Millsands." A goit—think "gutter"—is an artificial channel built to feed the mills. Other accounts said that Tommy wasn't dropped into the goit at all but straight into the middle of the horse dyke.

When I first read this story, I thought, *No wonder Harry wanted to work with steel*: a kid growing up above the pub where trade unions met to forge bonds and carry out pranks. I texted my father to tell him about Tommy Hotbread, and he wrote back to say that the Greyhound Public House had been a red herring. A different set of Wrights had lived there.

Yet I remained attached to Tommy Hotbread and the scissor grinders. They served as a comic foil to the strain of longing that moved through my father's narrative. I'd never heard him talk with any sense of loss about his own father, who had died years before I was born. Now he was mourning on behalf of his grandfather's bereavement, and it sounded like he was mourning on behalf of himself—how different his own life might have been, if Harry Wright had followed the family trade, how his own father might have become a shoemaker, might have passed the family skills on to him.

Tommy Hotbread—the watchman asleep in his watch box—appeals to me as a guard against sentimentality, by which I really mean grief. If Harry became a table blade forger because of the stories of scissor grinders around the hearth of a pub, then perhaps the loss of the shoemaker's craft—of what our fathers can give us—is no real loss. Maybe its disappearance is simply the snapping point of family thread, leaving room for desire. I want to believe that loss—of family ties, of inheritance—puts our lives in our own power.

In all of this, we did an exemplary job of avoiding the question of my grandmother and what we were going to do for ourselves now she was gone.

* * *

When Plotinus convinced Porphyry not to end his life, their relationship was severed. "He came unexpectedly to my house," Porphyry writes, "and told me that my decision to kill myself came not from reason, but from pure melancholy. He advised me to leave Rome." Porphyry set out for Sicily, and there he abandoned his plan for self-destruction. Also, he never saw Plotinus again. When Porphyry returned to Rome, his great teacher was dead.

I missed my grandmother's final years. After I came out of rehab, I needed to remove myself from her in order to live. It was the only way I knew how to stop imitating her.

This is not to say we never talked. I visited each year. We joked and she cried. But a core part of me was gone: the part that wanted to win my

grandmother's love by following her into disembodiment. Without that, a gulf opened between us. When we called to one another across this gulf, I spoke loudly and made sure that she could see my lips moving, since she was mostly deaf by the end, but I did not unzip my sternum and show her my heart. Instead, I talked to her about the things I thought she'd like to hear. I asked about the books that she was reading. I described new places I had seen. I avoided the topic of food. All of this is to say that I came to patronise her.

Although he convinced Porphyry not to end his life, Plotinus himself severely restricted his intake of food and rejected medical attention. This behaviour was an expression of his philosophical belief that his true self was his soul and that the work of philosophy was a rehearsal of death, that is, the final separation of his soul from matter. "Is it not enough that I must carry around this image which nature has placed around me?" he said, upon being urged to sit for a portrait. "Is it really necessary for me to consent to leave behind for an even longer stretch of time an image of the image?"

The word translated here as "image" is *eidōlon*, which originally denoted something much less material than Plotinus's usage suggests. Here are the dictionary meanings: *phantom; any insubstantial form; image reflected in a mirror or in water; effluence of atoms given off by any object and conveying an impression to the eye; image in the mind; idea; phantom of the mind; fancy; image; likeness; constellations; idol; image of a god*.

Plotinus attributed Porphyry's suicidal thoughts to mental illness, but his own leanings toward death were understood to be motivated by rational consideration: his body was no more than a ghost. An effluence of atoms. Perhaps, at its most material, a statue of a god.

The way anorexia worked between my grandmother and me was like this: we each believed that limiting our own consumption was necessary to maintain our place in the world, our worthiness of love, and our virtue. At the same time, each of us believed that the other should eat.

* * *

My grandmother was cremated on a Wednesday, ten days after she died. My mother called me, a few glasses of wine into her evening, to say that she had lit a candle for my grandmother, since she couldn't be at the cremation. Nobody was at the cremation, in fact, because of coronavirus.

If I could go back in time, perhaps I would say, *What cremation?* But I was afraid to cry.

"I don't want you to be depressed," my mother said. "Your grandmother had a good life. She was ready to die."

I was walking around the lake again. This time, the park was almost empty. Yellow caution tape was wrapped around the outdoor exercise station. Geese huddled close to the water. The afternoon was heavy with cloud.

What I felt most strongly at that time was constriction. To open myself to loss was to invite in grief like a wild animal—the stray kitten, for example, that had recently moved into my home: all precision-cut claws and barred teeth, wet-nose nuzzling at four in the morning, cross-hatching of scars up my arm, a lump under the duvet in the early afternoon.

Grief was too new. I didn't know how it would behave.

What I allowed to pass through was relief. The hospital visits were over, together with the tedious phone calls in which everything needed to be repeated four different ways, and nothing could be communicated except the desire to communicate. Also, though, there was the relief that it was no longer necessary to pretend that nothing between us had changed.

* * *

Of Plotinus's last moments, Porphyry writes that his teacher addressed a friend with the following words: "I have waited a long time for you. I am trying to give back that which is divine in myself to the divine that is in everything." As he spoke, a snake slid under his bed and disappeared through a hole in the wall.

Snakes are a symbol of the eternity of the soul. In the ancient Mesopotamian poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the eponymous hero, King of Uruk, travels to the land of the gods in order to retrieve the secret to eternal youth. He returns with a plant that the gods tell him to guard carefully, but when he falls asleep beside a watering hole, a snake comes out of the water, takes the plant, and consumes it. This is the origin myth for the power that snakes have to shed their old skins and crawl out in the world, raw and untarnished.

It is common for heroes like Gilgamesh to travel beyond the edge of mortality in search of hidden truths. When the Greek warrior Odysseus goes down to the underworld on his own journey, the shades cannot talk

until they drink the blood of sacrifices. "I led the sheep to the trench and slit their throats," Odysseus says, "until the blood flowed dark."

Among the shades, the most painful for Odysseus to encounter is his own mother. This is how he learns she is dead—at far remove, no corpse to wash, no rattling lungs. Just a shadow, the sheep's blood, her voice. A clean death. After they speak together, Odysseus attempts to embrace her, but she slides from his hands like a dream. "Why won't you stay still," he says, "so that I can hold you as I want to?" Then he checks himself: "Or did the queen of the dead stir up an *eidōlon* against me?" *A portrait, a false image, a phantom of the mind.*

"You haven't been cheated," his mother replies. "This is how it goes for us all after death: no longer do sinews grasp bones and flesh. Fire rages, glittering, through everything. Spirit abandons pale bones, and the soul flutters, then flees like a dream."

I could have written to my father and asked him, *Does anybody have her ashes?* Instead, two weeks into the pandemic, I attended a conference on the concept of the self.

Fourteen philosophers and historians lined up in a grid on my screen. A Cambridge professor spoke from his dining table about how we cannot know how someone thinks about the self until we understand their concept of death. A philosopher on the outskirts of Philadelphia described how, in the teachings of Plotinus, souls detach from the universe and descend into bodies through a craving for individuation, then return to the cosmos—*momma soul*—out of a desire for unity, completion, and understanding.

Outside my window, a thunderstorm hammered into the grass. The kitten gnawed my ankles. I muted myself and maintained a portrait-ready expression. At some point during the third hour, I began to tease the kitten with a feather tied to a stick. All of the interruptions of my material body that keep me distracted during conferences in-the-flesh were projected onto my environment. Everything beyond the frame of the camera—everything beyond what the philosophers and historians could see—was like the biting and scratching and purring and storming of my own agitated mind. To unmute myself was to put a magnifying glass to the chaos that swarmed beneath customary silences.

All this brings me to the question: What is in our power? Or, perhaps more precisely, what is the promise that power over the body offers us?

Plato taught that the body is a cage the soul must learn to escape. From my grandmother, I learned to lock the door of that cage tight in order to muffle the roaring within. But perhaps we were looking at it from the wrong angle. Plotinus differed from Plato: he said that the soul is not within the body; rather, it is the body that dwells inside the soul. My grandmother and I sought to govern our souls by controlling our bodies, but the task of watchman narrowed our souls and shrivelled our bodies into knots of unspent desire.

Zoom made me weightless. With a click of the mouse I undid my voice. Disembodied heads, gesturing to Plotinus, said things like "the more you want to integrate the self, the more you have problems with violence to the self in the mortification of the flesh." And then, as the kitten clamped its jaw around the fleshy part of my arm, "The body will be a non-negotiable in the constitution of the self. This is a request for information: How long was this the case?"

Light passed behind the faces and faded in one time zone after another, as morning flattened into afternoon.

ECLOGUE OF THE CATERPILLARS IN PRIME TIME

JOHN KINSELLA

Woolly bear caterpillars
of the tiger moth are
entirely confused by their
naming but some

out in their gardens
are intense out of season
consuming sunflower leaves
and the remodelling

of 'winter', or tracing
the more or less familiar
potatoes and wild oats
to play the seasons'

antiplay of vitality,
of fatalism, the rain
and vegetation issue
the gorging and shitting

and cascading
towards pupating
in the hand so gentle
those thin spins and spirals

coiling into palm (and shitting)
to be let go where it will make a go
of forming its own bureau
of meteorology

on its own but synced
with other waiting pupates
nearby but that's to come
as is the tiger moth

which spent itself laying
some months ago and I adjust
the garden for future
to suit all the collapses,

giving it time and space, too—
a sharing agreement,
a thesaurus of 'invasive'
and 'contradiction',

leaving me the gardener
who sabotages my own crops,
but still finds enough to harvest
more than the leaves of my childhood

with their abjections and wonder,
and that *waiting to see* what they
might become, where I would garden
without damaging—companion to it all.

GRAPHOLOGY RESTORATION 9: LOVE POEM

JOHN KINSELLA

There's more in what we share
through a waxing crescent moon
low over the sea we haven't seen
for well over a year, the brooding
even furious orange as it closes
in on the horizon lost not to night
but the ship lights and the false
city-like coruscation of the Ocean
Apex rig from Texas embroiling
our future in 'standby mode' before
heading back to the North West Shelf
to end all possibilities of earthly
delight. And the moon knows, slicing
into the sea to set off a release of mist
we can't see even close together
looking out over low waves breaking
a rearranged shoreline, the marks
of moon a portent we read as we wait?

BAD HAND

TONY BARNSTONE

The yellow mouth of the school bus opened to eat him, and he slumped into the fractured plastic of his seat, knowing at the next stop the boy with the fingers chopped off at the knuckles would climb into the bus like a panther among squirrels, take the seat behind him, and grind the whitened stumps into the back of his head while he flinched. What combination of starry omens and planetary dread, of boxcars and snake eyes, could have spun the world inside this child's heart to such daily vicious thrill at the despair of other children, the ones with perfect hands?

At lunch, huddled with friends by the mahogany-stained folded-up bleachers in the gym, he tried to ask them, but they studied dented apples and plastic-wrapped sandwiches in wincing silence. In their minds the awful hand was reaching over the ruptured and taped upholstery again and scraping like a bone bow across their resisting bodies, grating out the thin music of their screams, these beautiful little boys and girls who flinched away from the stumps of his loss.

They also had suffered the knuckle torture, also had avoided the bus home, preferring to stumble through the cut black stubble of the cornfields and be late for dinner, but they could say nothing. He was a fact of life, like brain-eating bacteria. So the boy came up with his own scenarios for what violence had severed that hand. A bad cut on a table saw that spritzed the sawdust red. Freak guillotining by falling glass. Psycho stepfather with a hatchet.

And often he wondered, what did they do with the severed digits? Did they keep them strangely preserved in formaldehyde, floating and pointing everywhere and nowhere in the green liquid of a screw-top jar? Or did they bury them in a small box, out in a field somewhere, or in the backyard by the oak tree like a time capsule floating in earth through decades in which that sad and terrible boy was fated to be the asshole of every story?—a tiny coffin in a makeshift graveyard where those fingers wait for the rest of him to join them, those pallid fetuses, those curling orchids, those question marks, the pale nails growing into hooks.

DOG IN THE NIGHT

PAMELA PAINTER

In every story's evening and every novel's night there is only the one bark, by one dog, alone in the night. Tell me: where is this dog that barks in the night? The dog that races from story to story, lopes from novel to novel, streaks into flash. The dog whose bark never disrupts a family argument, foils a break-in, or halts a drug deal, and never prevents a murder.

And why, why does the dog bark only once? This sad and sorry "once" makes it impossible to locate the dog, to race toward the mayhem, to speed to someone's rescue. Surely, it's not a tiny, yappy dog that nestles in a Fendi or Louis Vuitton tote, welcomed at posh restaurants. The dog must be large, its chest a barrel, its throat a tympanic bell, its bark—not a yip, not a howl—able to travel from doghouse to a place where something dire is afoot. Afoot by the light of the moon, or stirring on a moonless night.

Did I say doghouse? The dog could be tied by a frayed length of rope to a tree or abandoned on the side of the road. Maybe the dog is in trouble. Where are the other dogs? There is never an answering bark, a howl, a snarl of outrage, no Lassie to the rescue. I worry about the dog. I worry about us.

CONTACT

EDWARD HIRSCH

Theodore Roethke, "Cuttings" and "Cuttings (*later*)" (1948)

CUTTINGS
Sticks-in-a-drowse droop over sugary loam,
Their intricate stem-fur dries;
But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water;
The small cells bulge;

One nub of growth
Nudges a sand-crumb loose,
Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrilous horn.

CUTTINGS (*later*)
This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,
Cut stems struggling to put down feet,
What saint strained so much,
Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?

I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
In my veins, in my bones I feel it,—
The small waters seeping upward,
The tight grains parting at last.

When sprouts break out,
Slippery as fish,
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.

A Saturday morning in September 1979, a perfect fall day in the Midwest, football weather. I had recently moved to Detroit for my first teaching job, and I felt a sudden urge to get in the car and drive north on I-75 for a hundred miles, to sail past Warren and Flint into the Saginaw Valley—the towns are gritty, but the countryside is ancient, flat, and vast. "Michigan seems like a dream to me now," Simon & Garfunkel sang on the cassette, "I've gone to look for America." When I arrived in Saginaw, which had once been a magnet for German settlers in the lumber trade, I bought orchids and roses at a local floral shop, parked the car on the corner of Gratiot and Midland Roads, and walked through Oakwood Cemetery to section 86, lot 394, where Theodore Roethke (1908–1963) is buried next to his parents, Otto T. Roethke (1872–1923) and Helen Huebner Roethke (1881–1955). I stood in a light wind and felt "the dry scent of a dying garden in September" and placed my flowers on the nubby ground. I don't know how long I stayed there, out of respect, not praying, though every now and then the odd line popped into my head, such as "God, give me a near. I hear flowers" or "I've crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or a dog." I had meant to drive past the Roethke house on Gratiot Avenue afterward—it's just a couple of miles away—but I was unsettled and forgot and wheeled back onto the highway toward my new home.

Theodore Roethke pitted himself against oblivion—"I practice at walking the void," he said—and was not afraid of the strange, the uncanny, the mysterious. He grew up in the harsh soil and savage climate of central Michigan, where his family owned a twenty-five-acre set of greenhouses. His grandfather, Wilhelm, had been the Prussian chancellor's chief forester before immigrating to America and starting a floral company. His father and his uncle Charles, who lived next door, eventually built it into the largest complex of greenhouses in the state. Roethke wondered whether they did it out of love or some "obscure guilt" for coming from such warlike Germanic tribes. They were violent men with green thumbs. Something was off in the family wiring, and it was gossiped that they had *ein Nagel im Kopf*, "a

nail in the head," a vernacular expression for arrogant eccentricity. As a boy, Roethke roamed the property, near and far, especially a game sanctuary that the family maintained—"a wild area of cut-over second-growth timber"—and dwelled in the midst of rocks and plants, weeds and moss, flowers of all kinds, especially orchids and roses, his father's specialty. Subsequently, the world of the greenhouse came to stand for the lost country of childhood and, at the same time, to serve as the central symbol, both the heaven and hell, of his poetic universe.

The men in Roethke's family clashed over something or other, probably the fate of the business, and sold the greenhouses in 1922. Roethke was a young teenager when his father died from terminal cancer a few months later, and the kingdom of his childhood collapsed. As his biographer Allan Seager points out, "what he lost when the dirt fell in his father's grave was going to take him the rest of his life to learn." Nothing more momentous ever happened to him, and his Oedipal love and fear of his father, which is encapsulated in his most well-known lyric, "My Papa's Waltz," was inextricably intertwined with his passionate, idiosyncratic feelings for nature. As he recalled in his late poem "Otto":

> In my mind's eye I see those fields of glass,
> As I looked out at them from the high house,
> Riding beneath the moon, hid from the moon,
> Then slowly breaking whiter in the dawn;
> When George the watchman's lantern dropped from sight
> The long pipes knocked: it was the end of night.
> I'd stand upon my bed, a sleepless child
> Watching the waking of my father's world.—
> O world so far away! O my lost world!

Roethke never recovered from childhood, but like a spunky, roaring, postwar American version of Rilke, who counseled the young poet Franz Xaver Kappus to "raise up the sunken feelings of this enormous past," he turned it into fertile soil for his art. It was this feeling for a vanished Midwestern childhood as well as the poet's sense of forever being "the lost son"—to use the title of his second book—that first drew me into the world of Roethke's poetry in the early 1970s.

Roethke links the moderns he ingested, like D. H. Lawrence ("For Lawrence and I are going the same way: down: / A loosening into the dark") and Dylan Thomas ("This rare heedless fornicator of language") to the poets reading him, such as Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, Robert Bly, W. S. Merwin, and James Dickey, who considered him the greatest twentieth-century American poet. All these poets schooled themselves on Roethke's dark pastorals; they were especially influenced by the way that he traveled backward and tried to recover primordial experience. As he phrased it in a notebook entry: "A poem that is the shape of the psyche itself; in time of great stress, that's what I tried to write."

The deep-seated struggle and determination to become a poet is one of the defining features of Roethke's life. He possessed what in a student essay he called "a driving sincerity" and all his life considered himself an initiate, "a perpetual beginner." He loved the catchy, strongly stressed rhythms of children's verse, of Mother Goose and other folk material, and incorporated them into hilarious nonsense poems and innovative long sequences. A childlike orality—"I sing a small sing"—with an undertow of need or longing is one of the hallmarks of his poetry: "Snail, snail, glister me forward, / Bird, soft-sigh me home, / Worm, be with me. This is my hard time" ("The Lost Son"). He caressed the primitive sounds of words and believed that repetition in word and phrase and in idea is the very essence of poetry."

Roethke was a huge, dancing bear of a man, a heavy drinker, a "ringtailed roarer." He had gargantuan emotional needs, disabling insecurities, and insatiable appetites. Sunk in what he called "a full-life crisis," he suffered from periodic bouts of mental illness. His sense of himself could be wobbly and he often overcompensated. As a young writer, he sought out mentors and made strong early alliances with Rolfe Humphries and Louise Bogan, with whom he had a tumultuous affair—"I hope that one or two immortal lyrics will come out of all this tumbling around," she said—that metamorphosed into a sweet lifelong attachment. He showed up unannounced at Stanley Kunitz's house in the Delaware Valley, mumbling compliments and clutching a copy of Kunitz's first book tucked under his left paw. They stayed up all night drinking and talking about poetry. "The image that never left," Kunitz later recalled, "was of a blond, smooth, shambling giant, irrevocably Teutonic, with a cold pudding of a face, somehow contradicted by the sullen downturn of the mouth and the pale furious eyes: a countenance

ready to be touched by time, waiting to be transfigured, with a few subtle lines, into a tragic mask."

Roethke was devoted to poetry as a form of "memorable speech" and didn't so much read as devour the work of other poets—from John Donne and Sir John Davies to Emily Dickinson, W. H. Auden, and Léonie Adams. He was so absorbent that you can't always distinguish him from his models, which is why he used the nonsense poem "The Kitty-Cat Bird" to caution himself: "Be sure that whatever you are is you."

Roethke's gift for immersion helped to make him a compelling role model and teacher. He invested a mammoth amount of energy into teaching poetry, which he once said is like "lugging hunks of pork up the lower slopes of Parnassus." He did stints at Lafayette College and Pennsylvania State University, where he was also the tennis coach ("Roethke, Penn State Tennis Coach, Author of Book of Verses," the *New York Herald Tribune* announced in its "Sports Here and There" column in March 1941) before moving on to Bennington College and the University of Washington, where he spent the last fifteen years of his life. He taught students to revel in the sounds of words and conveyed his passion for every sort of verse form. He praised verbal immediacy and paid special attention to texture, rhythm, and energy, which he called "the soul of poetry." He said, "I am overwhelmed by the beautiful disorder of poetry, the eternal virginity of words."

Too young to study with him, I used to seek out testimonials by his former students, such as Carolyn Kizer, James Wright, Richard Hugo, Jack Gilbert, and Tess Gallagher. They remembered how he recited poems—he boomed and purred—and described his mercurial personality in class. Hugo said he was "arrogant, hostile, tender, aggressive, receptive." Kizer noted that though he could be high-handed toward everyone else, he was "charmingly deferential" to the old people in her class, a rabbi and a sea captain, because "he said that they knew things the rest of us didn't know." Above all, as Wright put it, "A course with Roethke was a course in very, very detailed and strenuous critical reading." Roethke's disciples remembered him in the specific—his tripartite sense of dramatic structure (turn, counterturn, and stand), his idea that every line of a poem should be a poem—and the general: his impetuousness and impatience, his full-throated devotion to the art. Like Hart Crane, he liked to quote Rimbaud's idea of the "systematic derangement of the senses," but, unlike his Romantic

precursor, he invariably left off the word *systematic*. As an undergraduate, I studied with Glenn Leggett, the president of Grinnell College, who had taught with Roethke in Washington, and he regaled me with stories of his friend's intense competitiveness and vocational fire. "You don't want to play tennis with him," Leggett recalled, "though you do want to take his course in verse writing." He seemed to forget that Roethke had been dead for nearly ten years. "Gee," Leggett said, looking at one of my poems and channeling the growly sarcasm of the master, "maybe you should dump the participles, cut the adjectives, and tighten the rhythm." Then he blue-penciled the lines he thought were slack. I held up my poor potted plant. It was eviscerated.

I've been reading Roethke sympathetically all my life, but I've never been able to warm to his first book, *Open House* (1941), which took him ten years to write. It has a compact, witty, ironic manner that seems alien to his natural abilities and Romantic inclinations. As a hardworking, highly susceptible young poet, he took his lead from T. S. Eliot and imitated the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets. Roethke himself later criticized the "chilly fastidiousness" and austere vision of his apprentice volume.

Roethke's breakthrough second book, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948), freed him from the censors. It was as if he had suddenly discovered the American vein of Emerson and Thoreau, as if his work had gotten a transfusion from Whitman and Williams. His first book made a promise—"my secrets cry aloud" and "my heart keeps open house"—that his second fulfilled. He found his poetic when he discovered how to use free verse to make contact with the loamy soil of his childhood. The figure of the open house gives way to the memory, a poetic discovery, of the glass enclosure, a hothouse world that he called "a symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth."

The family greenhouse was for Roethke both sacred and abysmal ground, simultaneously a natural world and an artificial realm, a locale of generation and decay, order and chaos. It was wilderness brought home. The fourteen "greenhouse poems" explore the instinctual sources of life. The sequence begins with the pendant lyrics, "Cuttings" and "Cuttings (*later*)," that read to me as a single poem separated into two parts. They are invariably considered together. Roethke admired Rilke's animal poems and tried to apply something of the same active, concretive method to plants. His

language is thickly textured, noun clustered, as in Hopkins, and I hear "Inversnaid" in the background ("O let them be left, wildness and wet; / Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet"). Closer to home, I suspect that Williams's poem "Spring and All," which is about the difficult struggle of everything to be born and grow, stands behind this two-part sequence, though, as the son of a florist, Roethke brings a ground note of experience, a level of contact, to use one of Williams's favorite words, to his characterizations that gives them a more granular specificity. Roethke enclosed these poems in a letter to Williams in 1944, and the older poet recognized in them a fully mastered fresh sound, what he described as "a cello note, one of the lower strings, but near its upper register."

Roethke recreates the experience of cutting a section of a living plant, replanting it, nurturing it along, inducing it to grow into independent life. It's cut off from its parent, like a person. Roethke had become almost physically allergic to abstraction and now uses a visceral language to dramatize a small, momentous, dangerously fraught journey.

"Cuttings," which was first called "Propagation House," consists of one sentence stretched across two quatrains. The poet is trying to look at something stirring to life more acutely than it has been observed before, and so the act of seeing becomes part of the poem. Here, the speaker is personally removed, like a scientist or a filmmaker. Although the lyric is brief, you can closely trace its staging, and if you wanted to shoot it in slow motion for a magazine such as *Nature*, you would start by placing the camera at a certain distance. The tone is nerveless, the mini-drama intense.

Hover from above:
Sticks-in-a-drowse droop over sugary loam,

Now move in for a closer shot:
Their intricate stem-fur dries;

Zoom all the way inside to see them absorbing water:
But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water;
The small cells bulge;

Keep the camera focused on something tiny peeking up tentatively from the soil:

One nub of growth

Keep the camera steady to catch the minute nub making way for itself:

Nudges a sand-crumb loose,

Shine the spotlight so that it finally becomes visible aboveground:

Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrilous horn.

The poem "Cuttings (*later*)," which tracks the next stage of the journey, is more subjective, the verse irregular. The first stanza is a quatrain, which structurally continues the first poem, but the second stanza stretches out to seven lines. Bogan once sent Roethke a copy of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* and advised him "to *look* at things until you don't know whether you are they or they are you," and that's the process that is enacted here. Another element enters the poem, something lightly, even humorously spiritual. The objectivity gives way, and you hear a distinctive voice trying to describe a stemming rebirth:

This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,
Cut stems struggling to put down feet,

When I first read this, I was caught off guard by the first line because I kept expecting those first two active words—*urge*, *wrestle*—to act the way they usually do, as verbs, but they turn out to be nouns ("This urge, wrestle . . . of dry sticks"). There is a progression, too, enacted through the increasing syllable count of the three words, the movement from *urge* to *wrestle* to *resurrection*. Roethke loved to key sound and so the *ur* of the word *urges* plants itself in the word *resurrection*, which has an unmistakable religious valence, though it's playfully attached to *dry sticks*. It's a tiny rising from the dead. There is no verb in these lines, which enact an infant *struggling*. I am reminded of one of Roethke's notebook entries from 1944: "I learned to struggle in the stem." There is something light footed, too, in the

way that the Roethke now introduces a metaphor from the human body. The cut stems are both a plant trying to take root and a wobbly baby striving *to put down feet*.

The next question is both playful and serious: "What saint strained so much, / Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?" If you were skeptical about the underlying meaning of *resurrection* when you initially read this, as I was, then this funny rhetorical question intentionally answers your doubt about the poet's underlying intention. Roethke has a way of being both comically self-deprecating and deadly serious at the same time. He is describing the rebirth of a plant, but there is now a clear suggestion that he is also talking about the rebirth of a person, a self. When you slow the poem down in this way, you notice that when you leap across the gulf to the second and final stanza, the speaker aggressively enters the poem for the first time. You can catch him in the act of listening and speaking up:

I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
In my veins, in my bones I feel it,—
The small waters seeping upward,
The tight grains parting at last.

At first, the speaker seems as if he is putting his ear to the ground, listening to an infant-plant crying from underearth—this begins the hissing undercurrent of *s* sounds—but in the second line, he modifies this so that the birth pangs are also something that he feels inside his body. He mingles this image in the third line so that what he feels inside himself is the same water that the plant absorbs as it springs to life. By the fourth line, the plant and the speaker have merged so that the "tight grains" are parting from both the cuttings and the person.

There is an astonishing transformation and fusion in the last sentence, the final three lines, as Roethke now weds together his imagery of the vegetal, the animal, and the human.

When sprouts break out,
Slippery as fish,
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.

Here, the tender sprouts suddenly break out; they emerge—smooth, moist, and clammy—like a fish, and the speaker quails because he is scared of what's happening, not just to the plant, but to himself. He starts shaking as he moves backward toward his own *beginnings*. The precise noun, the newly coined word *sheath-wet*, recalls the "musty sheath" that first poked up in "Cuttings," though now it's become wet with slime and birth. Over the course of two short poems, a mere nineteen lines, Roethke has recreated a vulnerable experience of rebirth.

I wish I had space to linger over the entire sequence of Greenhouse poems, which explore the instinctual sources of life from the dank minimal world of roots in "Root Cellar" ("And what a congress of stinks!") to the open, flowing reality of young plants in "Transplanting" ("The whole flower extending outward, / Stretching and reaching") to the daredevil giddiness of "Child on Top of a Greenhouse" ("And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting!"). Roethke was compulsively conscious of the agony of birth, the painful effort of things to emerge out of an underworld swarming with malevolent forces. There is a sense of "tugging all day at perverse life" in "Weed Puller," of plants acting like reptiles in "Orchids" ("So many devouring infants!"), of tearing the ground and disturbing the natural rhythms of the living planet in "Moss-Gathering," of ferocious adult sexuality in "Big Wind," of one surviving tulip swaggering "over the dying, the newly dead" in "Flower Dump." These poems go underground to dark obsessive realms and then chart the struggle back up for light. Roethke was searching for "news of the root," the vigorous green force of life. He was determined to keep going further down, further back, to locate the primary of life, what Dylan Thomas characterized as "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower."

As I think about Roethke's contribution to the American project, I recall that the greenhouse was linked to two other discoveries that he made in the 1940s. Largely prompted by Kenneth Burke, our Coleridge, who later wrote an insightful essay about his friend's "vegetal radicalism," Roethke began to explore the poetic possibilities of the unconscious, returning to the murky realms of childhood and thus commencing what he called "the retrospective course" of a "hallucinatory dream." He also recognized that the organic process of plants could stand as a metaphor for free verse, each poem taking on its own sensuous form and intrinsic shape. This was an

Emersonian notion of poetic form, a fundamental of Romantic expressiveness, and it enabled Roethke to become the figure that John Berryman dubbed "the Garden Master."

The garden has a long poetic history, and yet no one ever probed plant life quite the way that Roethke did—no one got so far down in the dirt to write a spiritual biography. He seemed always to be thrusting himself into the past, courting childhood terrors, struggling to be born and born again, to climb out of the slime and make something more of himself. Sometimes he viewed human beings "as no more than a shape writhing from the old rock." He believed that this view came to him, at least in part, from his Michigan childhood. "Sometimes one gets the feeling that not even the animals have been here before," he said, "but the marsh, the mire, the Void, is always there, immediate and terrifying." This was where he schooled his spirit. We don't typically think of flower poems as terrifying, but there is nothing of the bright pastoral in Roethke's view of the green world. He goes down to the depths before he hits the heights. He looks at things until he loses himself and becomes them. Then he struggles to separate. There is mortal dread and mental anguish in his difficult descents, tentative reawakenings, and ecstatic fusions. That's why the Greenhouse poems have such harrowing force.

Roethke never forgot where he came from. He was an exemplar of the poetic extreme, the one who went to the edge, who modeled the commitment. Personally, when I consider the totality of his project, I also like to think about a September morning many years ago when I impulsively decided to drive to Saginaw to visit his gravesite. I was nervous and excited about beginning my first university job, and it seemed whimsical to take the day off when I had so much still to prepare. I realize now that I wasn't just paying my respects to one of my formative poets but also summoning his example and presence. I was touching the soil and reminding myself of the cost, the calling, and the vision.

HERE BUT ELSEWHERE

BRET SHEPARD

Winner of the 2020 Laurence Goldstein Poetry Prize

Already sick, I waited for the doctor. Two
months later the appointment was canceled

as storm prevented flights into Atqasuk.
We build us alone. The solitary fox empties

the house of its many things. Days counting
pills to pollute the body like the ice warms

to its desires. Quiet deaths, these glaciers.
All the erratics, a kettle lake warms to boil.

* * *

Sedge edges the village, spreads. *Dominant*

brings to mind curved landscapes—a city
against the foothills, ocean to shore—even

tundra where tussocks seek enough height

to flower. Even with that there are eyes
reaching. This landscape appears beyond

desires shaped. Even without that, names
mapped it, those eyes running horizons.

-40 degrees—to touch each other is arrival.

* * *

Thirty-third spring. Painted tundra fills
the time. It looks like a scene we might find

in the open room beyond this room, far past
ourselves, a parade of caribou eyes aimed.

* * *

The absence is enormous in the Arctic.

Christian's mother died when a rope
broke as she helped pull the bowhead

onto the beach, its recoil force enough
to kill what it hit the moment it did.

Some deaths create other ways to die.

Some losses you only understand once
your body and mind come back together

wherever it is beyond what we name.

* * *

On this street or that one, on Fireweed
or Tudor, maybe downtown Anchorage,

their blocks on my breath, if I see a story
repeat a gesture and fall, maybe as Jonah

would have years ago, winter on his face,
will it return as pores release in the night?

* * *

As we tilted our cold necks to the floor

one friend stood behind and pushed
hard on the back of our head to make us

black out. We tried to turn off, inhaling

days with every drug hidden in school
to leave us and return new metaphors.

HERE BUT ELSEWHERE

* * *

Emptiness is unresolved movement between two
events. At Meade River School we saw our home

outside the village. What forms in absence of sight

is body felt. We watched a body walk the unplowed
winter road parallel to our house but not reappear

to any eyes. My father ran home to catch the boy

using our phone. Ours was the only house he hoped
wouldn't question a long-distance call to Anchorage

police. After public safety listened, after we heard

why, they returned him home to the grandmother
abusing him. Presence is language the body learns.

* * *

I showed up at school every day to say the words
of others, voices keeping a record of my presence

static and flattened. Most winter days gathered
like the absent bodies passed out from the previous

night, high in a bone-thin shack edging Browerville
where friends smoked out and then crashed, unsaid

names unrecorded. Sitting quiet at a sanitized desk
for certificates of official skin, I knew the absence

of veins in perfect attendance, the flatness of words
formed and spoken. The only answer was *here*.

HERE BUT ELSEWHERE

Language doesn't make decisions. It keeps
guessing. When I was given my Inupiaq

name, Jenny Felder talked me into sounds

from the book listing each possible version
nearby. I still hear her. I would speak them

now if my mouth could shape the words.

* * *

Snow takes the most of us when it comes
to fall. In what felt like Spokane's worst

snowstorm for decades, my brother and I
only had mukluks for our feet, the fur warm

and foreign, absent of what had sold out
in stores across the white city. All we had

was distance. All we wanted were the snow
boots with the Velcro every other kid wore.

* * *

We carry too much of the past. Expansive
bodies like snow melt. It's not the only thing

leaving, leaving, leaving. It melts into smaller

bodies of water, so we must wade through it
to the source, because the arctic doesn't freeze

itself. It grows into what it must be, and is.

JIA

MAY-LEE CHAI

Mom grabbed her jewelry box, and her suitcase, and her purse, and then took Lu-lu by the wrist, announcing, "I've had it. We're leaving. We're going back to California. I want to see my family!" Mom ordered Lu-lu to get in the car and then backed down the driveway fastfastfast—their tires even squealed a bit—and then they were driving away.

"But I didn't pack any clothes."

"We'll buy you new things."

We don't have any money, Lu-lu thought, but she did not speak up for fear her mother might change her mind. It was exciting to be in the car, driving, the idea of leaving, leaving Dad and the house and the fighting, the shouting, Lu-lu's school with the girls who stared and wouldn't let her sit at their tables in the lunchroom.

Lu-lu didn't remember California. She'd been born there and then her parents had moved to the East Coast when she was still a toddler, and then again to this small town in Indiana when she was eleven, but now she was fourteen and ready to go.

Mom never drank when she drove. When Mom drank, she just stayed in bed, her nerves shooting sparks through her body.

Lu-lu pressed her feet against the floor mat, as though she had secret pedals on the passenger side that could make the car move faster.

"I miss California," Mom said. "I never wanted to leave. Your father put up such a fuss. He said, 'You are holding me back! You are ruining my career!'" Mom cried, tears dripping off the tip of her nose. She wiped them on the back of her hand, pulled a crumpled tissue from the pocket of her

coat. Dab dab dab. "But what about my life?" She said this louder than Lu-lu expected, a wail.

They used to travel every summer up and down the Coast when Lu-lu was very small. They'd gone to Washington, D.C. to see the museums on the Mall and the Lincoln Memorial, all the way to Monticello in Virginia, another time to Fort Ticonderoga in upstate New York in time for the Bicentennial. Mom was afraid of flying, plus it was too expensive. They stayed in all the travel lodges, the HoJos and Super 8s and Motel 6s and motel chains so small no one else had ever heard of them.

Dad snored, and hearing him in their cramped motel room drove Lu-lu crazy. She couldn't sleep, listening to the deep inhale, the pause, and the tea-kettle whistles as he exhaled loudly through his nose, before the final gentle "poo" sound he spat from his mouth. "How can you stand it?" she asked her mother once.

"Oh, I got used to it," Mom shrugged.

In those days, it was her parents' restlessness that drove the family. Lu-lu sat in the back seat of the car with her books and her dolls, ignoring their fights as they drove in circles, lost on the interstate, trying to find some new famous place they needed to see as a family.

Once when Lu-lu was seven, they drove all the way to Vermont with Ye-ye and Nai-nai in the car. Mom wanted to see the autumn leaves. They normally didn't travel so late in the season, but Dad had agreed. He must have had some kind of break from school.

They picked fragrant apples in an orchard and ate them as Dad drove, Ye-ye removing the peel with a knife in a single long red thread. They all marveled at the whimsical signs shaped like black and white cows, the roadside stands selling fresh produce, buckets of yellow squash and orange pumpkins, the barns red as firecrackers against the green fields, and the clear-as-water blue skies. Nai-nai had laughed with delight, exclaiming in Chinese and English that they'd somehow stumbled upon zhen shi de mei guo, "the real America," the America of old black-and-white movies and history books, home of the blonde blue-eyed Americans. It had been a magical trip, and it had given Dad ideas, a sense of the bigness of America. Why live so tight and small with this big, vast country out there?

Too bad they'd forgotten to take a single picture.

The next year Nai-nai died, and then Ye-ye grew frail, then frailer: he couldn't sit in a car for their trips anymore, he couldn't live on his own. He went to live with Lu-lu's uncle back in Taiwan.

Every year after that Dad applied for new jobs, for teaching positions with bigger salaries, administrative positions, until he got the offer at the college in Indiana when Lu-lu was eleven. She wondered what Nai-nai would have thought of their new small town with the big houses. Unlike their old house in New Jersey, this house was big enough for her grandparents to live with them comfortably full-time. But Nai-nai was dead and Ye-ye was not coming back, even though her father still asked him, every month, when they talked on the phone.

"Is Ye-ye coming?" Lu-lu waited up, after midnight, just to ask.

"No, not yet," Dad said. Later she heard her father tell her mother, "He says he's too old. He doesn't want to move anymore."

But next month, Dad would call his father again, describing the rooms in their new house, the space, the lawn, the big trees. "You would love it here, Ba." Then Dad said it was zhen shi de meiguo. Not the crowded city where they'd lived all those years after the war had ended and they'd first come to America, dependent on their sponsors, trying to rebuild their lives. Hui jia, Dad implored. Come home. In Chinese the word for family and the word for home were the same: jia 家. Come home, come back to the family.

Dad kept asking, month after month, but Lu-lu knew Ye-ye would not love it here. It was Nai-nai who'd loved the green fields and the open skies on their trips, and Ye-ye had played along because he'd loved her. She didn't know how to explain this to Dad, however. Not in a way that wouldn't feel like she was blaming him.

Lu-lu knew it was her grandparents who'd chosen the characters for her name. For months, as her birth approached, Ye-ye and Nai-nai had written fervent letters to her parents in California, suggesting various characters, explaining the symbolism, the good fortune that each combination could bestow upon their grandchild's life. Finally, her parents settled on Lu, 鹿 meaning "deer," and ying, 英 "brave, heroic."

As a small child, Lu-lu had not understood what her name meant. *Brave deer?* Hearing this made her giggle and prance around the living room,

pretending to be an animal. Ye-ye and Nai-nai said it was a good name for a girl, but she wasn't sure.

After her parents enrolled her in school, they discovered Lu-ying was hard for her teachers to pronounce, and so they suggested Lu-lu, her nickname, and it stuck.

After Nai-nai died and Ye-ye flew away, her true name was the only thing that kept her tethered to her grandfather.

When her father called Taiwan, he did not pass the phone to Lu-lu. Calls were expensive and it was important to save money. Ye-ye was hard of hearing anyway. Her voice was too soft. Once, shortly after he'd first moved, when Lu-lu had picked up the phone, her grandfather had said, "Hello?" over and over and then hung up, no matter that Lu-lu was shouting, "Ye-ye! Ye-ye!" He could no longer hear her voice, and thought he'd lost the connection.

When Ye-ye wrote her twice a year, for her birthday and for the new year, he wrote her full name on the envelope in his beautiful handwriting, Miss Lu-ying Chao.

She put the letters in the envelopes in the bottom of her desk drawer for safekeeping, evidence of her true self tucked away for another day.

The long road trips stopped after they moved to Indiana. They were too busy, or rather Dad was too busy, settling in to his new job at the college in their small, small town where people stared at them, specifically white people, staring because they'd never seen a Chinese man married to a white woman before. In the other towns they'd lived in, closer to big cities, in California and New Jersey, her parents' marriage had never been a thing that made people stop on the street, slow down their cars, so they could turn their heads and stare at the three of them on the sidewalk or on the lawn of their house, which Mom had been so happy about, because it was larger than any house that they'd ever been able to afford on either coast. "I feel like a celebrity," Mom had joked at first. But the staring continued, and she eventually stopped making jokes. "It's 1981, for Pete's sake," Dad said.

They used to go to Indianapolis, only fifty miles north, every weekend after they first arrived. Dad missed Chinese food so much, and their town didn't have a Chinese restaurant. They found a restaurant in Indy that Dad liked, not as good the ones they'd found in Chicago, but Chicago was too

far to go often. In winter, there were blizzards, the sky clouding over with thick, fleecy clouds, and what seemed like flurries could turn to a blizzard wind and snow that blew in all directions.

One Sunday in November, driving home from Indy, they'd been stranded overnight in a highway rest station two miles from the exit to their town. The last twenty miles the storm had come up, defying all the meteorologists, and they'd crept along the interstate in a caravan of cars and trucks, moving less than five miles an hour. After that, Mom didn't want to go anywhere. Everything made her nervous. The wind was too strong, the clouds were menacing, or the trucks too fast, their drivers reckless. "They're going to run us off the road," Mom wailed, covering her eyes with her hands, praying loudly. "Turn back, Walter!" she implored Dad. "Oh, let's go home!"

But if winter was bad, spring, summer, and fall were even worse. Thunderstorms could flood the roads, or turn to hail in a heartbeat, or send tornadoes in funnels of death to wreak God's havoc on the wicked earth.

Lu-lu learned to read the sky; greenish-yellow bruises appeared in the clouds, and she'd know a storm was coming and they could turn around in time, return to their home, safe.

When they were trapped at home, her parents grew more tense, arguing, their voices circling the rooms of their house.

Someone began dumping garbage on their lawn. At first Lu-lu's parents thought it must have been the wind, knocking over their trash cans on the curb, spreading the trash from the torn bags for all to see. Funny that the rest of the neighbors' trash cans were in place. But the wind was unpredictable like that. And hadn't they all heard the wind after they'd gone to bed, rattling the glass in the windows, whooshing through the trees?

The next week it happened again.

Dad secured the trash cans in place with concrete bricks among the trash bags, setting rocks on the lids, so there'd be noise enough to wake him, her mother, and Lu-lu, if someone tried it again.

Then other people's trash started appearing on their lawn.

Lu-lu followed behind her father with an open Hefty bag as her father, armored up in gardening gloves and his Yankees cap, bent over and picked up the soggy empty packages of Jolly Green Giant frozen peas, cans that once held Campbell's cream of mushroom soup, the boxes of Kraft mac and cheese and no-brand corn dogs. Their neighbors ate crap, Lu-lu realized.

She glanced at the neighbors' houses, scanning for a crack in the tightly drawn drapes of the elderly couple who'd squinted at her without saying hello when they first moved in. Lu-lu remembered the green and yellow Mayflower truck parked in the street, the movers sweating in the August sun, piling the boxes onto dollies, and the elderly white couple across the street frowning from their living room. She surveyed the house with the wooden duck-on-a-stick in the lawn, its wings that spun around in circles in the wind to drive away . . . what? Owls? Pigeons? Something that flew, Mom had said, but Lu-lu couldn't recall what now. Was it the neighbors with the American flag decals all over their mailbox? Or was she stereotyping them by judging their lawn decor? Did this mean she was a bad person? Lu-lu tried to remember what she'd been taught in CCD about judging people in her heart—was there a special saint she was supposed to pray to for strength?—but she turned up nothing, her mind was empty, as she watched her father fill the Hefty bag with other people's trash.

The next week when it happened again, Mom called the police. The police did not come to investigate. They did not rope off the lawn with yellow tape. They did not send an officer with a notebook to diligently take notes, and a brush to dust the metal trashcans with powder that would reveal the culprits' fingerprints, a blue light to catch hidden forensic evidence on the driveway. Lu-lu realized she'd watched too many cop shows on TV.

There was the staring. There were the catcalls shouted from the windows of cars, pickups. There were the racist jokes that white people would say in front of them. "I heard all the stray cats and dogs have gone missing in your neighborhood, Walt. Not cooking up anything special, I hope?" The transposed L's and R's. The jokes about height and shoe size, which even Lu-lu knew had something to do with sex. There were jokes at faculty parties, after all the cocktails. Lu-lu could hear from whatever side room she was relegated to with the other children. Often she was put in charge of the children, which she thought was strange given her parents weren't the hosts. What new world had they stumbled into? Still it was better to be in the side room with the little kids, sitting and watching movies on cable or directing them in games so they didn't fight. Mom was proud when Lu-lu was useful. The adults had been drinking and their voices were loud, loud

enough to carry down the hall, over the clanking of dishes, under the door. Dad laughed the loudest, as though to say, he wasn't bothered at all.

Once when she returned home early from a school party, the last she'd ever attend, Lu-lu found her parents shouting at each other in the kitchen. There were shards of glass on the linoleum mixing with meat and pasta and bits of iceberg lettuce. Mom cried, face in her hands, and Lu-lu grabbed the whisk broom under the sink, swept the mess into the small plastic dust pan, dumped everything into the trash. Her parents stayed in the kitchen, arguing, while Lu-lu crept down the hall to her bedroom to finish her homework. They argued on and on, and she didn't dare emerge again, although she was hungry, her stomach rumbling all night.

Once after she was absent from school for a week with a cold, Lu-lu got a B on a pop quiz in algebra and Dad took the flowered vase that always sat on the coffee table in the living room and smashed it against the wall. Then when a strange boy she didn't even like called and asked for her on the phone, Dad broke the jade tree that Ye-ye and Nai-nai had said would be Lu-lu's someday, stomping on it with his shoes on. Mom didn't say anything but announced, "I am going for a walk." Lu-lu noticed that her parents were cross with her even as they nodded at the neighbors they suspected of dumping garbage on their lawn as though to say: You haven't gotten to us yet.

Lu-lu didn't confront her parents about their behavior and how it made her feel, small and ugly and worthless, because of the small, nagging, ugly feeling that perhaps her parents were angry at *her*, sorry she'd been born, disappointed that she stood out racially from the other kids in this town, her features so obviously a blend of their own, which made them seem naive about their love, like suckers even. *Haha!* Lu-lu couldn't imagine how her parents had expected her to turn out, but their anger at each other made her feel responsible for not measuring up.

At fourteen, Lu-lu dreamed of nothing so much as leaving. When they'd first moved to Indiana, she had hoped they'd go back to New Jersey someday, but after three years away, her old friends had new friends and wrote her less frequently, and she dreamed of a fresh start, a new place, a new home, where no one knew them or who they'd become.

California sounded just fine even if she didn't remember it at all, and she knew Mom had wanted to leave her family behind because her father drank too much and her mother had been angry her whole childhood. Lu-lu knew her maternal grandparents only through a single photograph taken with them when she was a baby and her mother's stories. But California was home to the movie stars, to all the women with smoky eyes that she was falling in love with, Sean Young in her *Blade Runner* shoulder pads, Maren Jensen who battled Cylons. Lu-lu clipped their pictures from magazines, pinning them to her wall around her mirror, so that she could gaze from their beautiful faces to her own plain one. She didn't have words yet for this feeling.

Maybe in California, Lu-lu thought, she would not feel so alone.

They made it to the edge of town, just before the exit to the interstate, when Mom pulled off. "We better get some gas," she said.

"We still have half a tank," Lu-lu said. But she didn't dare press the point that they could get gas at the next exit. Lu-lu never knew when her voice might set her mother on edge.

Lu-lu bit her lips and tried not to think, tried to turn herself completely blank so that she would do nothing that would irritate her mother. The sky was clear, free of clouds as far as Lu-lu could see, perfect traveling weather. Once she and Mom were gone, Dad would have to follow, and then they would all be safer. It seemed clear to Lu-lu.

"Well, I'm getting gas now! We don't want to be stranded on the highway. You wouldn't like that one bit, Missy." Mom got out and slammed the door shut. She fumbled with the gas hose and nozzle. The wind tossed Mom's fine blonde hair around her head. Mom turned her face directly into the wind and lifted her chin, so that her hair was blown out of her eyes, the better to see.

It was cold out. All the trees along the side of the ditch had already turned from yellow to brown, or their leaves had already fallen, their branches bare, scratching at the sky. Snows would start soon enough. *Then how can we drive all the way to California?* Lu-lu thought. They should leave now. Now was still possible.

As Mom threw open the door, wind blew inside, chilling Lu-lu. Mom grabbed her purse and then stomped across the asphalt to the little convenience store to pay.

Lu-lu watched through the windshield as Mom talked to the clerk behind the counter.

The young man nodded his head, then he laughed. Mom was saying something funny or charming.

Mom kept talking. Lu-lu watched her mother's back, the way she moved her head, tossed it, patted her hair.

The sky darkened. A murder of crows swooped over the gas station and disappeared into the trees across the street. The car grew very cold and Lu-lu's toes began to burn. She tapped her feet against the floor mat, faster and faster, trying to warm them.

There was a danger in joining Mom that something might turn, might become Lu-lu's fault, but it was also possible that Mom had forgotten Lu-lu was there, waiting. Lu-lu got out quickly and ran into the convenience store. The door had a bell that rang when it opened, and both Mom and the clerk turned when she came in, her black-brown hair blown about her head, her cheeks flushed.

Mom smiled but not at Lu-lu. She was high from the conversation, the episode, mania, something.

The clerk stared at Lu-lu, narrowing his eyes.

"Mom?" Lu-lu said.

"Oh," said the clerk. He turned back to Mom. "One of my cousins adopted an Oriental baby. And they sure love her."

Mom laughed along, as though this was a special club they'd joined, she and the clerk's cousin.

"I'm not adopted," Lu-lu said. "I'm the product of my mother having sex with my father."

"Lu-lu," Mom said, "we're going to be late. We'd better go." She jangled the keys in her hand.

Lu-lu followed Mom outside again. She noticed Mom was carrying a brown paper bag, which she put quickly onto the floor of the back seat. Mom climbed behind the wheel of their Jeep and turned on the ignition. Lu-lu scrambled into her seat on the passenger side.

"Oh, that did me so good," Mom said, but not really to Lu-lu.

"Are we going to California?" Lu-lu's voice came out as a croak, as though she hadn't spoken in years.

Mom was smiling at something Lu-lu couldn't see, something only Mom could remember.

Don't drink, Mom. Don't drink. If she said it aloud, would Mom be angry? Would it ruin Mom's good mood, and then Mom would drink more? If she said it, and Mom drank, then it would be Lu-lu's fault.

Mom drove past the taxidermist shop, the used car lot and U-Haul rental lot, the Hoosiers Bar & Grill, and the Dairy Queen, which was dark, closed for the season. Mom drove past the high school track, the Frontier Savings & Loan, past the Kroger, the post office, the First Baptist Church, the Methodist church, and then the dog park, or what Dad called "the dog shit park" because people let their dogs run free and people were selfish and terrible and didn't clean up after their animals.

Mom turned down their street. Dad had put the porch light on and all the lights in front of the garage.

"Don't tell Dad where we went," Mom said. "He doesn't need to know. It's not bad to keep him guessing sometimes. Our little secret."

Lu-lu eased up on the floor mat, lifted her feet. They were home.

SUBJECT POSITION

ANNA MARIA HONG

This is one utterance from disaster:
    a cluster-crust of impacted fester,
twisting rank and minister,
    funneled through fingered channels—
the opposite of *speak* is *spread* — an un-
    twinged union of gross collusion,
depravity eating its own delusions
    in the cone of its master's cavity—

    —the opposite of *feel* is *blunt*, to plough
        or to sough, to sink or to slough
    off the tinted terror of supremacist
        cupidity. To walk alone in my skin,
    as an _____ _____ _____,
        thinking past catastrophe.

LET GO THE ENDS

ANNA MARIA HONG

for & after Muriel Rukeyser

I lived in the first century of these wars
and the next, my living spanning breadths
of destruction, technological revolution
enabling almost unforeseen occupations.
Most mornings I unwound the weeks'
astonishments and terrors, waves
of the senselessly dead and undone, those who
reaped this suffering, core-dug
and new. I would text my friends, similarly okay and reeling, call and send
letters and packages when I could, receive them.
Some days, getting to pen and paper
after walking on salt-washed streets, before teaching
and reading, before conversing across glass and screen. By evenings, worn
through
from lathing more news. Often, a scrap or story reached
through page or radio, telling of those who suffered incursions
to their persons, scaled attempts to choke and hold
under—who forged through obliterate
obfuscation, churning the means, speaking to those they heard and for
the many
unperceived.

VLADIVOSTOK & CONSCIENCE

ANNA MARIA HONG

All books are made of 20th-century
values. What is the coin of the region?
By the bridge, a scent of honey. *Show me*
your registration. The man
in the booth lifts his arm. The bridge is wood
and cracks.
Another building of red-brown brick
and unknown function.
The lake with its mirrored glaze
and rippling gray depths. And the brown leaves crackle
it's over, it's over, it's over.

DANIEL

BEN PERKINS

I was five years old and already getting accustomed to loneliness before I had my first best friend, when my parents chose for me a seemingly good, seemingly abiding Christian child in whom I would come to discover a hidden personality. He was an active, imaginative boy, and for a long time, I feared that the way he treated me in private meant that I wasn't fast or clever enough to have a best friend at all. If we had met at elementary school, I would have been turned off by the fact that he was two full years older, and the thought of being his close friend would've seemed a little abnormal. I would've returned to my jumble of kindergartners, and "Daniel" would've been the oddball second grader without a friend. In fact when we were introduced, he was even more isolated than that; he was homeschooled. "We haven't met anyone Ben's age," my mom said when his family came to our porch to welcome us to the neighborhood.

His parents affected an air of experience, and my parents must have, to them, seemed young and overwhelmed. Palm Beach County was not what we imagined. Our neighborhood was mostly tall pine trees and saw palmetto bushes in the late 1980s. Our new home was not "turnkey." In fact, it had never truly been completed, and it had not been lived in for some time. There were dragonflies everywhere and walking stick bugs the size of cigars. There was no grass, but fine, ashen sand and pine needles, limestone bits and shell fragments. Crabgrass and sandspur. Trucks came on certain evenings to fog the neighborhood. Nothing was paved except the main road into town.

Daniel wormed and noodled between his parents, and I stood there

between mine, sullen, and it was a bit like an arranged marriage. He was too shy to look at any of us.

"Look dad, look," he said, "they have a prickly pear."

"Just call it a cactus, you dumb kid," I thought. He was four inches taller than me, gangly, and his flattop was uncool.

They paid us another porch visit once we had unpacked and settled in. This time, Daniel stepped forward as though we'd been long separated, as though coached by his father, and gave me a showy, mannish hug and said, "We've got to get together, Brother." I cringed. I did not hug back. I sensed that the adults were smiling—amused, or worse, impressed.

And yet, the only other boy my age from the neighborhood was childish and immature. He drank Juicy Juice compulsively, and he introduced himself by running into our house, stealing my big, plastic Richard Petty stock car, and running out the door giggling. So it was flattering to be considered suitable for someone two years older. And then as always, I felt most like myself when others were idealizing me, declaring me precocious.

* * *

The first time Daniel and I did something together unsupervised, we went to this big dark house with cedar siding down the block where no one was home, and he had the key.

"They're on vacation. We're going to feed the dog."

"Where's the dog?"

"We probably won't see him."

We entered an empty house, and he disappeared into a walk-in pantry. I had never seen a home where the food got an entire room of its own. The cabinets even matched the wood around the doorways, which matched the staircase. It was like a TV house. A 40-pound bag of dry dog food tipped over out of the pantry like an avalanche, and a silver dish went flying, and I heard Daniel laugh. I got BIG butterflies in my stomach.

"The dog will eat it up."

"Do the adults pay you?"

"The last time I was here, they said I could have a Kool-Aid packet, so I think that means I'm allowed to have them as payment."

We opened their cupboards, and there were all these kids' cereals. He grabbed a box of Kix and started eating by the handful.

"Is that kind good?" I had never had kids' cereals. He offered me the box. We ate in silence. Little Kix went "pop" and "scrunch" under our feet.

The Kool-Aid packets in this cabinet weren't just the normal kind. There was Ecto Cooler, which had Slimer from Ghostbusters. He gave me one and took one for himself. There was Purplesaurus Rex, which was important to me because it was a dinosaur instead of a fruit, and I loved dinosaurs. We both took one of those, and then I couldn't believe it because they had Sharkleberry Fin, which had a cool shark wearing sunglasses and looking tough and cool, so we took all of those because these people probably didn't know how good their stuff was. Then it was too many to carry, so Daniel just put all of it in his pockets, and he locked the house, and we started fast-walking down the road, and then we were running together, and I thought, "This guy is wild! He does whatever a kid wants!"

* * *

We went on trips to the public pool, the zoo, the movie theater, Kmart, and even Lion Country Safari. His mother drove him and his two younger sisters, Della Jo (four) and Didi (two), around in their strange, blocky yellow Japanese station wagon. His father sat in front if he came along. Children were only provisionally allowed in the front seat. There were a lot of rules for me to learn that only applied when I was with his family.

At the Sizzler, Daniel tried to impress me by showing me the buffet bar, which none of us had been allowed to eat from.

"You have to see. You can just take from it."

"But you have to use a plate," I said.

"No . . ." he said without looking back at me.

We dodged through men's and ladies' legs into a bright solarium, and then I had to hand it to him. It was impressive. There were ham steaks and bread sticks and egg rolls and nachos and Jell-O salad and fish sticks. It was all bathed in hot orange light.

"You can just take," he said, and he reached to a steel cylinder of red and white starlight mints. He took two, and he gave one to me.

In the parking lot, he was hiding his mint under his tongue, and I had mine in my pocket. But then he casually took his out of his mouth for a moment and put it back in. His father spoke up, and I had not realized until then how ramrod tall and dark-eyed and cross the man was.

"Where did you get that?"

"You can have them," he pouted.

"What did we learn," he said, "about stealing?"

Moments later Daniel, his father, and I were all back inside the Sizzler where an audience had been requested with the manager of the restaurant. When the man appeared, he looked busy but concerned. Daniel told him that he had stolen and apologized. The restaurant manager sounded worried for Daniel and asked him what he stole, and when Daniel told him, the manager avoided looking at Daniel's father anymore. He said, "OK, well thank you for telling me, and I think we can let you off with a warning this time."

When we got back to the car, Della Jo asked, "Where was everyone? Where did Daddy and Ben and Daniel go?"

Daniel's father uttered the word "stole."

Della Jo said, "But why? Why did Daniel steal?"

And Daniel's father spoke at length about the lessons from Sunday school while I whispered to Daniel. I told him that I thought it was okay that we took the mints and that I was on his side. He nodded his head without looking back at me.

* * *

Most of my time with Daniel was actually spent around the house, very quietly, deep in imagination. His house had an air conditioner, and mine did not, so we waged action figure wars on the brown carpet of his bedroom. I knew the dirt and detritus in the pile of his carpet as well as his actual toys. Fingernails, food crumbs, sand, an ant, an eyelash. We dug into it with the molded plastic feet of Transformers and their weird, off-brand allies: GoBots, Rock Lords, Battle Beasts, Dinobots, which were dinosaur Transformers that I didn't get to play with because they were his favorite, and Trypticon, which was a giant dinosaur Transformer the size of a small tricycle that turned into a future city, which I didn't even get to touch.

At my house, we played on the exposed subfloor of my bedroom and built sprawling future cities out of Legos with elaborate civil services including home oil delivery for our robot citizens. Daniel and I planned our future cities in pencil on poster-sized paper because my dad, who worked on construction crews, would bring home reams of bound, industrial cyanotype

blueprints. We would draw on the reverse side. We drew together in rapt silence. Daniel had no talent—he was completely awful, but I never said anything.

Sometimes I would draw something that offended him; like one time I was feeling sinister, so I drew a cloaked figure of death with a bleached cow skull for a face, and he told me to stop, told me his parents forbid that sort of thing.

Another time we were drawing in his bedroom, on his own drawing pads, and he showed me something he had evidently been working on for days or weeks. It was a menagerie of naked women and girls being chopped up, murdered, and tortured. Some were tied up or impaled. Some had their legs spread open. Some had their breasts being chopped off. Some were hanging upside down. All their faces were clumpy and ugly with too-heavy pencil lines.

The very strangest thing about it to me was that the grown naked women were drawn with vaginas. Which I didn't understand. I thought grown woman had *pubic hair*, and female children had *vaginas*.

"Why did you draw it like this?" I asked, pointing between their legs. "Why did you draw the line?"

"Ladies have that."

"No, that's babies. Ladies have hair."

"Ladies have the line too."

I was nonplussed. Ladies have the line too? Something about that gave me a bad feeling. There was, most memorably, one naked woman lying on her back, in stiff profile, who had been cut up with a meat cleaver uniformly like a loaf of white bread. If there was "joy" in his drawing habit, I couldn't quite locate it. He must've recognized that I didn't like his aesthetic because he never shared his drawing pads again.

* * *

If it wasn't raining or too hot we went fishing in the flood canals that crisscrossed the neighborhood. They were full of duckweed and hydrilla and frogs and banded water snakes. The main canal that dead-ended our street was deep, and if you climbed down to the chalky bank behind the safety orange candy-striped road barricade, you could peer into the tea-stained water, and clouds of bream—pumpkinseeds and oscars and

cichlids—would emerge and peer back with little baby fish faces. And the more we fished these canals, the more we spotted other creatures. Leopard gar with beaks and terrible little mouse eyes. Softshell turtles whose heads looked like weird penises. Armored catfish that looked like extinct species from the Devonian. Daniel also made up fake fish compulsively, and I believed him as often as not.

Chris and KC were the fifth graders in our neighborhood, and they lived right at the end of the street. They protected us from neighborhood hooliganism when it suited them. They played organized baseball. They watched PG-13 movies. They knew insults. They had Big League Chew. They thought Daniel was kind of a baby.

Daniel and I had been fishing in the canal at the end of the street behind the road barrier with bits of white bread, and Chris and KC idly came to join us and talk about Nintendo and bass lures. After a while, they goaded Daniel, apropos of nothing, to suck on his own arm.

"Just do it, and count to twenty."

A weird thing to realize about Daniel is that he was terribly gullible. So when he was done sucking, he asked, "Okay?"

They both said, "Now you have a hickey."

And Daniel looked at his bicep, and his face crumpled. He made a long moan like he was trying to cry. Chris and KC laughed.

"My parents can't see that I have a hickey."

"Do you even know what a hickey means?" they asked.

"It means SEX," he sobbed.

I stood there as quietly as I could, and eventually Chris and KC went home bored. Daniel and I were running out of bait, but he was still sniffling. I reeled in a baby bluegill, and Daniel unhooked it for me and left it on the ground in the ashy sand and shell rock and crabgrass.

"Should we find more bread?"

He said, "You don't need bread to fish," which was news to me.

I looked at my fish on the ground, arching its dorsal spines. It was emerald green on top and buff and scaly through the throat like a hummingbird. Daniel was crouching over it. "Should we put him back?" I asked.

"Look, you just match up the curve," he said and pointed to the fish's gill flap and then stood and chopped the fish with the heel of his sneaker. It splayed open, the ruby gills, the swim bladder, the stomach, the liver, and

Daniel crouched down again and fingered through the offal like he was casting runes.

"The best," he said, "is the eyeball," and he took his narrow-gauge Eagle Claw fishhook and threaded it through, pulling the fishing line taught as the mouth still gawped, and popped it out like a baby tooth. Now we had all the bait we needed. Now he never had to go home.

* * *

We took a bath together almost as soon as we met. My mom got a phone call.

"You've been invited," she said, "to sleep over."

This had never happened to me before.

"You're going to have so much fun."

I was nervous for the rest of the day leading up to it.

He only lived two houses away, and it was close enough for a long walk, but it had gotten a little dark, so my parents drove me in our car. They both wanted to bring me. They drove me up the driveway too. Daniel's house was brown and dark brown and low and oblong. They didn't have an upstairs or a garage. But they had a covered porch with a rocking chair. They had a fence and a farm gate and a long dirt driveway through slash pines. The blocky yellow station wagon was parked in the trees. My parents turned on the dome light, so I could see them, and they smiled at me.

My mom said, "If you want to talk for any reason, you can make a phone call home, and I'll answer."

I was surprised by her forwardness. I wasn't normally encouraged to use the telephone.

I left the car and walked to the covered porch, and my parents backed out of the drive. As soon as I entered Daniel's home, his mother made us start getting ready for bed. She led us down the short, dark hallway to a lilac bathroom and started drawing a bath in a periwinkle alcove tub and left us there.

"We have to brush our teeth now," he said.

I stared at him.

"MOM. Ben doesn't have a toothbrush."

"He still has to brush his teeth," she intoned.

"MOM. How?"

"He can use his finger."

"You can use your finger."

I stared.

"Here, I'll show you."

They had weird toothpaste that was meant for kids, so it tasted like aspartame, and it looked like it had glitter in it, and it extruded in a star shape. There was dried toothpaste all over the cap. In fact, there was tooth-brushing spittle all over the sink and mirror and floor. The bathroom smelled like dirty feet and spearmint. My bare feet stuck to the floor a little.

His mom came back and turned off the water. It didn't seem like enough for a bath. Daniel took off his clothes, and I stood there and stared, and his mother busied herself and tried not to look at him and then noticed me just standing there and said, "Well, take your clothes off!" and left. Daniel and I got in the tub. Didi and Della Jo peeked their heads in the doorway and stared. Daniel yelled, "MOM," and she came back and shooed them away and shut the door, and he and I were alone.

There wasn't enough water. It didn't even come up to my hips—didn't even cover my nakedness. I was cold except where I was underwater. I tried to stay warm by not moving.

Daniel had a mini basketball the size of an egg, and we were both sitting Indian style. There was a plastic hoop suction cupped to the tile. We took turns. I got very bored.

"Let's play, 'if you win, you have to put the other person's penis in your mouth and suck.'"

I did not respond. The water quickly felt spent of its warmth.

"If I toss the ball in your legs, I win, and if you toss the ball in mine, you win."

I did not understand, and I scowled. He was touching and fiddling with himself.

"If you make it, you get a point. And then if I make it, I get a point."

I did not understand, and I did not respond. I had memorized my whole phone number to come to this sleepover. I had memorized my mom's and dad's full names. I had memorized the numbers in our address so someone could always tell me how to get home, but I had forgotten those right away. They were too hard. I felt like this was too hard.

He began lobbing the mini basketball at me, toward my legs, and then

he made it in. He bent full over at the waist, and my penis disappeared into his mouth.

* * *

My body had never been subjected to a sexual sensation before, except for the hint of one. Whenever I had accidently peed my pants, my mother wiped me between the legs with a warm, soapy washcloth. Sometimes I pinched my penis shut if I had to go very badly and there was no bathroom nearby. Sometimes I climbed into my bed sheets without wearing underwear. It took very little for these touches to become too much or too shrill or too strange.

At five years old, sexual sensation lived in my imagination as small, fleeting, exploratory—hardly more than a rumor, and that rumor seemed to implicate that my body, at its threshold, was incompatible with these touches the same way it was incompatible with the heat of a dish from the oven or the cold of smoking dry ice or the quickening of an exposed electric socket or the scald of boiling water. Things that hurt in such a novel way that they seemed to transport you at light speed away from your body, and you had to find your way back before you could even cry out.

And yet these pains and excruciating discomforts were a familiar foreign tongue in which the hands of adults inadvertently spoke all of the time. The hands of adults usually spoke this way in carelessness, in their hurry, in clumsiness. Adults were always hurting my body with their hands. Sometimes it was a needle in the arm "to make me healthy," sometimes it was a wild spanking on my hips and thighs because I "deserved it," sometimes it was a comb being yanked through my hair because the hands were angry. If the hands were angry, it was easier to just assume that I deserved it. To incriminate the hands of adults was too sad to contemplate.

"Growing up" was the process of adults trying to inscribe on my body as much discomfort and force and shock and pain as they could—as much as my body could tolerate. My mind tried to transcribe it all into "knowing better" or "learning my lesson" or "being a big boy" or "not being a baby." And if these sensations could not be transcribed, then I cried. And if I could not cry, then the crying became a sound that lived inside of me like a ghost and followed me for the rest of the day.

Daniel sucking at my body like an adult inscribing sex on another

adult's body was impossible for my mind to transcribe. It was, of course, not meant to be able to. It was a bad faith inscription. It was a weapon. The sensation penetrated my body so violently as to muddle the idea of "actual" physical penetration. He scalded my body with the branching lightning of my own nerve endings. My mind howled with newborn ghosts. What a careless thing, was my latent thought. What a clumsy, stupid friend. Also: I will not be a baby.

* * *

With the mini basketball rocking like a buoy in the periwinkle tub, Daniel leaned back and said, "Ok, now your turn." I hunched badly. After a long silence, he went ostensibly back to normal.

"Let's play, 'we're back in time, and this is a lake with a mean dinosaur.'"

I did not respond.

"Maybe I should be the dinosaur."

He waited, but I had been transported away. A thing inside me had just spasmed and knocked over and strewn a tower of blocks. I was picking myself up. There was one block for eyes, there was one block for nose, there was one block for my scabby knees, and one block for fingernails. One block for naps. One block for hiccups, which I got when I ate a peanut butter sandwich without jelly. One block for the correct way to hold a pencil, which raised a little bump on my middle finger by the end of the school year. One block for shoelace tying. One block each for Bob Ross and Jeff Smith the Frugal Gourmet. One block for my ears because I couldn't hear anything. One block for each letter of my name. But what did they spell? I remember nothing of what happened next. Except I know that our entire friendship happened next—for three years until my parents summarily uprooted our family for another dilapidated house in a new, different, far-off place, never to return, never to hear from these people again. I don't remember ever getting out of that tub. I don't remember putting my clothes back on. I can assume that I spent the night with a pillow and his sister's Care Bears sleeping bag on the floor at the side of his bed. I can assume that I did not stop staring at the TV-static popcorn ceiling until long after everyone in that house was asleep.

I woke before Daniel the next morning, and I waited for him to stir. He had bright south- and west-facing windows where my bedroom had none at

all. He had a wooden bed frame and a brown lacquered dresser and a light switch with a plate around it. My bedroom had a twin mattress and a lamp on the floor. When he awoke, I waited for him to make suggestions for the day.

"Do you like blueberry pancakes?"

I nodded. I did. I liked blueberry pancakes.

We walked down the dark hallway, and Daniel stepped into the lilac bathroom, and I had to pee too, but I could already smell the sugary toothpaste, and it made me nauseous, so I decided to hold it until I got home or I could pee on a pine tree. He shut the door, and I waited in the dark hallway. I heard breakfast sounds from the kitchen, but I made myself as quiet as I could. I measured the tiles with my feet. I closed my eyes. I balanced on the grout lines. I breathed until I didn't smell the toothpaste. I breathed until I smelled only dark.

We took our seats at their dining table, and it was like a table from a furniture store. Its legs didn't even fold up. And my chair had a little pillow for my butt. Their linoleum covered all of their kitchen floor. The table was next to a sliding glass door that opened to their back deck and let in the light from their backyard, which was like mine but with more grass and trees and a tidy little cedar tool shed.

Della Jo and Didi were seated, their father was at the head of the table, and their mother brought tiny, golden pancakes and eggs and sausages for the center of the table. She brought their father a glass of tea.

"Here is the sun tea I made."

He sipped it.

"Is it okay?"

He paused.

"Too sweet?"

"I'll drink it."

She waited.

He sipped again and thought and said, "It's almost like poor people's tea."

"Oh."

"I'll drink it."

"It's not supposed to be sweet tea."

He smiled and said, "Tea isn't really supposed to be sweet."

She smiled and agreed with him and laughed a little.

He sipped it again and said nothing, and she waited a little longer and then took her seat by Della Jo.

Their father's voice was always a little louder than a normal voice, and I jumped when he said, "Daniel—would you like to lead us in saying grace?"

I copied what everyone was doing with their hands and heads and faces, and Daniel said some things to God in an "I'm sorry" voice, and then everyone began scooping food.

I ate three blueberry pancakes and some scrambled eggs and two sausages, and I was drinking some milk and Della Jo was telling an exciting story to the table when she came to a funny part, and she said, "Oh Christ!" then corrected herself. She said, "Cripes. I mean cripes." But her mom already heard and cracked her cheek with her open hand.

"I said cripes, I said cripes," and her mom smacked her again for talking.

"No you didn't," she corrected.

"Why am I being smacked?" she hoarsed.

Her mom hit her mouth again.

Della Jo whispered to the table, "It's not fair."

Her mom smacked Della Jo on the lips and leaned in closer as if inspecting her mouth for leaks.

Della Jo sucked in her lips and moaned through her nose.

Her mom lightly tapped where Della Jo's lips were hiding, and then Della Jo muted like a TV. She looked down into her lap and sniffed. I was glad she turned off.

I looked at Daniel, and he was looking down in his lap too.

I looked at Didi, and her face needed to be wiped.

I looked at their father, and he was sipping his tea with his elbow on the table.

I sipped my milk and looked at the milk, and I looked at how the bottom of the glass made a rainbow when it was only half covered with milk, and I kept taking little sips of milk so I could keep measuring the different size rainbows.

When my cup was empty, Daniel said to the table, "May Ben have some more?" and he put more pancakes and a sausage on my plate. When my plate was empty again, Daniel said, "May Ben and I be excused?"

We put our plates in the sink, and we put on our shoes and went out

the back door, and I ran out into the roaring furnace of the day. I ran to their property line against the woods, and I picked a pine tree and peed a yellow arc at the base of it where the sap came out and got chunky like melted candle wax, and then I peed in the ashen sand and pine straw, and it piled up in bubbles, and then a second pee stream joined mine, and the pile of bubbles was twice as big, and the pee started to make a dark pool, and it enveloped ants and leaves and a small black beetle. And it got closer and closer to our shoes, and we both laughed and yelled "Danger!" and scooted our feet back. We laughed and said, "Don't let it touch you!"

It was pretend acid, and if it touched you, that part of your body would disappear forever.

TWO GRAVEYARDS

RICHARD TILLINGHAST

Square columns carpentered by slaves
rose above my head.
Leaves swamped the veranda
where dirt-daubers built their laddered homes
and wrens scolded as I peered into
rooms furnished with dust and brokenness.
Up a staircase I guessed
there were bedrooms where lineage
had been engendered and cared for,
eyelids closed with silver coins.

Through a boxwood lane,
enclosed with an iron fence,
I found the family burying ground.
Names not used anymore, born-and-dieds,
far countries and near counties, a motto in Latin
were chiseled into marble.
I traced with a finger
letters eroded by rain and frost.

Where the land sloped sharply
a second gathering of stones surprised me—
none larger than a loaf of bread.
No letters memorialized

those that lifted and carried,
whose hands chopped and ploughed,
wrung the necks
of chickens and rocked the cradle
up there in rooms where paper roses
peeled from the walls.

THE HISPANIC INVASION OF TEXAS

MARIA ESQUINCA

How much history is enough history / before the word invasion / echoes inside a Walmart / at the border / A white man drives ten hours / to slaughter / la frontera / a vision of my people / buried / the hours wrap around us / like disjointed mouths / they ask / *¿estas bien?* / *¿dónde estas?* / *ten cuidado* / the Rio Grande eddies / into hymns of mercy / headlines fall like guillotines / 22 killed / 24 injured / to survive but to fear your home / is another kind of violence / overnight / El Paso becomes a site of remembrance / *It could've been my brother* / *It could've been my mother* / a row of white crosses alights on the asphalt / under the honeysuckled sky / the lilac mountains carve the names of the murdered / in another elsewhere pink-fleshed men and women brandish their glocks / a whole city folds into itself / rosaries bloom into grief / how much history is enough history / before terror resurrects / in the body of another white man

*The phrase "how much history is enough history" is borrowed from "What Seems Like Joy" by Kaveh Akbar. The title of the poem is a line taken from the racist manifesto written by the white supremacist who killed 23 people in El Paso, Texas. At the time this poem was written, 22 people had been confirmed dead. After a nearly nine-month fight, Guillermo "Memo" Garcia, the last living victim of the shooting, passed away, raising the death toll to 23.

JUST ONE DAY

JANICE FURLONG

The morning his sister Krissy was due to arrive, Wesley consumed twelve ounces of dark roast, two slices of Mestemacher Fitness Bread, one small nectarine, and *The Wall Street Journal* in its entirety before allowing himself to check, again, on the status of her flight. Hoping she would be delayed, if not completely waylaid, by the snow beginning to blanket Boston, he refreshed the JetBlue flight status page. *On time*. He retyped her flight number. *On time*. Mustering the steely resolve for which he was famous at the lab, he washed his coffee mug, sponged up crumbs from the teak tabletop, and folded his newspaper into the blue recycling bin. Faint rustling sounds began to issue from the monitor on his kitchen table. Head bowed, he waited. Sometimes his mother went back to sleep on Saturdays, gifting him another hour of silence. The rustling ramped up to a series of thumps. His precious morning solitude was over. His sister was on her way, and Margaret was definitely awake.

Easing her door open, Wesley found his mother propped up on pillows, knocking her feet against the white lacquer bedframe. Her nightgown, speckled with orange stains from last night's spaghetti dinner fiasco, was riding up above her knees.

"Can you let up on the kicking?" he asked, giving the hem of her nightgown a quick downward tug.

She lay still.

"Thank you."

"What's that thing?" said Margaret, pointing at the wallpaper, voice quavering.

The *thing* was an elephant. For weeks now, she'd needed a daily reintroduction to the concept of an elephant, along with reassurance that the image on the wallpaper would not harm her. Wesley hated the elephants too. When he'd purchased his Beacon Street condo as a newlywed, his wife immediately converted the smaller bedroom into a nursery featuring yellow wallpaper festooned with ridiculous dancing elephants and red hearts. Four years, sixty-eight thousand dollars, five donor inseminations, and a divorce later, the elephants taunted him, their spritely dance steps and obscene trunks reminding him of his failures as a man, as a husband.

"That thing won't hurt you," he said. "Are you ready to get dressed?"

"Black pants."

Margaret asked for black pants every morning, a nod, he realized, to the fashionable black pantsuits she used to wear to work. Rummaging through her bureau, he chose a pair of grey sweatpants and placed them on her pillow. He found himself staring at her fingernails. Once perfect pink ovals, her nails were now uneven, chipped. Averting his gaze, he sat on the edge of her bed. "Remember what I told you yesterday, about Krissy coming to visit?"

"Who?"

"Your daughter. Your wild child. My sister."

Margaret tilted her head, like a hunting dog straining to hear a distant sound.

Wesley lifted a framed photograph from her nightstand. A group of laughing women held an *International School of Lima Theater Arts Department* banner. "Here she is," he said, pointing to the cobalt-haired woman, positioned front and center, sporting a tiara and pink fairy wings.

"Why is her hair blue?"

"An excellent question."

His mother began picking balls of lint off her bedspread.

Wesley scanned the sky. The snow had stopped. Too dispirited to propose an alternative activity, Wesley joined his mother's lint removal initiative. Soon her bedspread was smooth.

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Although Krissy's visit was just a twenty-hour stopover in Boston, a midpoint between her home in Peru and her destination of Reykjavik, the

prospect of spending even one day with his sister generated a noxious blend of dread and resentment. Outside of their mother, they had no common ground, at least none he'd ever taken the time to discover. Their infrequent phone conversations were stilted. If he hadn't added that one sentence about Margaret's deteriorating condition to his last email, Krissy might not have bothered to add this stopover to her itinerary. Thus far, she had not made even a token offer to help with their mother's care. She did live four thousand miles away and travelled extensively for work, but in Wesley's view, the real barrier was Krissy's extravagant distaste for caretaking of any kind. She had never wanted children. Even pets were too much responsibility. Krissy herself told the story, repeatedly and unapologetically, of adopting a tiny black kitten when she first moved to Peru. Absorbed in her theater escapades, keeping odd hours, she kept forgetting to put out cat food. After a week, the kitten found itself another home.

In fact, Wesley didn't want his sister's help. He relished being the hero, the loyal son, the competent care manager, the man who got the job done. Wesley did have to hire a rotating trio of home health aides to dress, feed, bathe, supervise, comfort, and entertain Margaret while he worked, but the aides were bit players; he was the director of the operation. Wesley wanted nothing from Krissy. Nothing except a definitive display, a sincere display, a sustained display of appreciation for the responsibilities he'd taken on when he moved their mother into his home.

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Just after nine, the doorbell rang: three short bleeps, followed by an interminably long buzz. This was Krissy's signature ring, her version of the first measure of Beethoven's Fifth. *One day*, Wesley reminded himself. *Just one day*.

Before Wesley could extend his hand, Krissy swooped him into a tight embrace. She smelled of patchouli and sweat. "You look exactly the same," she exclaimed.

"And you have blue hair."

"I'm thinking of going magenta next. Something new, you know?" Squinting, she scanned the room. "Where is she?"

"In bed."

"Lucky her! I got zero sleep on that plane." Krissy brushed snowflakes

off her alpaca coat and shook her head like a dog shaking its fur dry. "Why do mothers with screaming babies always sit next to me?" Depositing her suitcase in the middle of his foyer, Krissy discarded her muddy Doc Martens an inch from the border of his hand-loomed rug and tossed her fur coat and coffee-stained suede gloves on the arm of his white leather couch. Maintaining a discreet butler-like distance behind her, Wesley hung her coat in the closet, tucked the gloves into her coat pockets, and placed her boots on a sheet of newspaper.

Flopping in his armchair, she perched her stocking feet on his cherry coffee table. Wesley brought her a glass of water. "So. Reykjavik." He cleared his throat. "What's this conference about?"

Krissy wriggled her toes. "I'm teaching a master class, on the Stanislavski System. Eighty people registered. It's going to be epic."

He tried to muster interest; she did have a substantive career. Fluent in four languages, she'd performed all over Europe, South America, and parts of Asia. But that word *epic* hit a nerve. Everything Krissy did was *epic*. She spent her college years at Bennington smoking weed and roaming Vermont villages with an improv troupe called Stranger Things Have Happened. After a stint in the Peace Corps, she took the job teaching drama in Peru. Her emails always included emphatic subject lines: *Hiked the Inca Trail! Went surfing! Made ceviche!* During summers she traveled to places like Kathmandu and Ho Chi Minh City to run drama workshops and give lectures about her craft. That's what she called it, her *craft*. Meanwhile, Wesley, four years her senior, finished a PhD in biochemical engineering, joined a research lab, and married Maureen, all according to plan. Except for the infertility. And the divorce.

Before Krissy could elaborate on her epic master class, Margaret materialized, half hidden behind the living room door. Relieved to see she had managed to dress herself in the gray sweatpants and floral print pullover with no food stains, Wesley motioned their mother to come forward.

"Lunch bunch," said Margaret. "Time for brunch."

"Mom!" Jumping up, Krissy whacked her knee on the edge of the coffee table, sending her water glass crashing to the wood floor.

Margaret stiffened, like a child playing freeze tag.

Wesley summoned his best take-charge voice. "Nothing's broken, Mom. Just a spill."

A dark spot appeared in the crotch of Margaret's sweatpants. As the stain seeped through the gray cotton and his mother looked increasingly bewildered, Wesley felt his face flush as deeply as if he'd had an accident himself. The home health aide had mentioned occasional episodes of incontinence, but he'd never had to deal with such a travesty himself.

"Oh. My. God." Voice low, Krissy turned to her brother. "She's a mess."

Wesley felt a surge of anger. His sister, the mess expert, the blue-haired, patchouli-scented tornado with a penchant for sweeping all things orderly into the air and dumping them down in unruly heaps, was scolding him about a mess? What a bad decision he'd made, giving Margaret's aides time off for the duration of Krissy's visit, imagining their absence would allow him to showcase his caretaking competence. He couldn't allow Krissy to see him fumble. "I'll deal with this," he said. "Go. Sit in the kitchen. There's coffee."

With his sister safely out of view, Wesley armed himself with a roll of paper towels and a spray bottle of bleach. After swabbing up the puddle, he attempted to wipe his mother's hands. She batted him away. Unable to coax her to stand, he lifted her ninety-eight pounds of brittle bone and sour skin, carried her to her room, and placed her on the bed. Margaret threw her pillow onto the floor. Wesley retrieved it. In her closet, he found a half-empty box of *Depends*.

He held up a diaper. "Do you know how to put this on?"

"Black pants," she said. "I want black pants."

He considered phoning Margaret's daytime aide, who, if offered a generous cash bonus, would have dashed over in a flash. But no. He should get the job done. "Lift your hips, Mom, just a little."

She jerked away.

He pulled off her soaked sweatpants and wrestled her out of her underpants, trying hard not to look at her almost hairless pubic area, her flaccid belly. After wiping her with a wet washcloth, Wesley eased a diaper under her hips, fastened the tabs, and eased her into clean sweatpants. These moments of intimate communion with his mother's body left him feeling like a pervert, a voyeur, desperate to look away but unable to avert his eyes. Her whole body seemed oddly unfamiliar. Even her hair, a skunk-like mane of black and white, seemed like the hair of a stranger. Only this year, as the glint of silver at her hairline sprouted into four inches of white roots,

did he realize his mother's sleek black bob had been a dye job. Before she started losing her mind, she never would have allowed her roots to show; taking immaculate care of her appearance brought her pleasure. For three decades she'd been a Mary Kay lady, selling cosmetics to the women of their Albany neighborhood, charming customers with her perfectly painted lips, her slightly manic energy, her bawdy sense of humor. More than a few of Wesley's high school friends had crushes on her. His mother used to smell good, too, favoring a perfume called L'Air du Temps. God, he loved that scent. That mother was gone now, gone for good.

Margaret wiped her nose on her forearm, leaving a trail of clear snot from bony wrist to elbow. "I'm tired," she said. A whisper of ammonia and sweat wafted up from her inert body.

Wanting to comfort her but not knowing how, he watched her drift off to sleep, envious of the effortlessness with which she switched from on to off. Wesley's off switch had never worked properly. Back in elementary school he used to lie awake at night, ruminating about his poor performance at recess. Recess had no rules. Boys ran in chaotic zigzags across the blacktop, shoving each other's shoulders, making fart sounds on their forearms, calling each other doodoo head, and Wesley could not figure out how to enter the fray. Even if he could have discerned the rules of engagement, he wasn't sure he wanted to engage. Sleepless, he'd long for his mother. Like magic, she would appear beside his bed, read to him from his favorite dinosaur book, rub his bony back, tickle his ribs, make him laugh in spite of himself. *You'll figure out the friend thing*, she'd say. *Just give yourself time*. Some nights she lay down next to him until he drifted off.

Wesley still struggled with bouts of insomnia, the worst of which had been triggered by the baby issue. Back when she was well, his mother used to pine openly for grandchildren. Knowing Krissy was a lost cause, Margaret focused her campaign on Wesley. *Babies will soften you*, she used to tell him; *they will expand your heart*. Swayed by his mother's exhortations, and afraid to challenge his wife's fierce determination to conceive, he'd gone along with the pregnancy quest. He wanted to get the job done. He wanted to please his wife and his mother. But when he tried to envision life with a child, he stiffened. He did not enjoy children. Children were chaos machines. They required flexibility he didn't possess, patience he couldn't muster. The louder his private doubts about having a child had become, the

more aggressively he had silenced himself. Maybe his heart was not capable of expanding.

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Sealed trash bag of soppy paper towels under his arm, he found Krissy poised in the middle of his leather couch, cross-legged like a yogi, mug in hand, kohl-rimmed blue eyes teary, full of what he hoped was appreciation for the odious task he had just performed.

"I finished off your coffee," Krissy said, planting her mug on his cherry coffee table.

He moved a stack of coasters into her line of vision.

Flipping open her compact mirror, Krissy swiped away mascara smears with the tip of her pinky. "Is her doctor any good? Maybe you should get a second opinion."

"I already did," he said, sliding a coaster under her mug. The neurology consult report was so dense he'd required a medical dictionary to decode the essential findings. "Same answer. Early onset Alzheimer's."

"She has just that one aide?"

"I hired two more, for nights and weekends."

"God! How much does that even cost?"

He feigned an offhand shrug. "I can cover it." Between Margaret's own substantial bank accounts and the money their father had accumulated before his final stroke, their mother was in fact quite wealthy. With power of attorney and full access to her funds, his own out-of-pocket expenses for his mother's care were modest. Still, she was living rent-free. With him.

"What does Mom do all day?" Krissy asked.

"Watches television, mostly."

"God! That sucks, right? She needs more stimulation."

"And you recommend—what? Season tickets to the American Repertory Company?"

"You know what really sucks? Your attitude."

Chastened, he rubbed his temples. "Yeah. I guess it does."

Her face softened. "I just—I'm still in shock."

Wesley nodded. He knew a few things about shock. That first phone call from the Albany policewoman was the worst. Yes, Margaret King was his mother. No, he was not aware she'd just taken an early morning

stroll around her oak-lined suburban neighborhood clad only in a black Wonderbra. Yes, he'd noticed changes, though nothing patently alarming: she talked less during their weekly phone calls; she seemed newly oblivious to daily news events; she'd forgotten his birthday. Yes, he understood it was now inadvisable for her to live alone. Yes, she had family who could take care of her. *I've got this*, he assured the officer.

Within weeks, Wesley executed his Albany-to-Boston rescue mission. He was glad, in the beginning, to have Margaret with him. Unmoored as he was by his divorce, his mother's needs anchored him. At first, Wesley tried to convince himself grief was the cause of his mother's oddities. His father's sudden death four years earlier had been traumatic for them all, most of all for Margaret. Grief could fog a person's memory. Still, grief did not explain the egg shells Margaret stuffed in his silverware drawer; or her unshakable belief that his upstairs neighbor had stolen all three of her cashmere sweaters; or her inability, after repeated tutorials, to locate the on button of his television remote. His gladness was gone now, replaced by a sadness that felt almost sinister. His sister might be in shock at the moment, but as soon as she landed in Reykjavik and began captivating her acolytes, the shock would melt away. He was stuck here. He hated watching pristine snow drifts turn filthy gray, hated his freezer-burned lasagna dinners, hated the aides who treated Margaret like the child she had become instead of the mother he loved. As Krissy rambled about her shock and her worry and her questions about their mother's future, Wesley felt his armor start to crumble. Crumbling was not an option. Not in front of Krissy.

Wesley picked up his car keys. "I need to buy more diapers."

"Right now?"

"If she wakes up hungry, give her applesauce. If she's agitated, put on some Bach."

"Since when does she like Bach?"

"Bach calms her down," said Wesley, teeth clenched.

Krissy shrugged. "If you say so."

Rather than walking to the corner CVS, Wesley drove his Prius to a Walgreens all the way in Charlestown, devoting the entire twenty-minute drive to a vigorous recitation of his sister's faults, her self-centeredness topping the list. Krissy's need to be fawned over, to revel in applause, seemed

insatiable. But could she applaud him for all he'd done for their mother? She could not.

Inside the store, Wesley surveyed a mind-numbing array of pads, tampons, mini-pads, and panty liners. A store clerk, viewing him from a discreet distance, finally approached. "Can I help you find something?" Wesley explained the situation and the clerk told him, "Adult diapers aren't in the feminine care department." As she led him to a different aisle, Wesley made a mental note to swallow a lethal dose of Tylenol if he ever found himself in his mother's situation. Exiting the store with two boxes of Depends, Wesley wondered how his sister would cope if Margaret had another accident during his absence. Krissy would be at a complete loss. She would have to wait, in a state of uncharacteristic perturbation, for his return. Although he had intended to head straight home, Wesley stopped at the Boston Sports Club. He spent twenty minutes on the nautilus circuit and ten minutes on the elliptical, entertaining catastrophic images of what might have ensued in his absence. Still angry, still melancholy, but strangely hopeful, he headed home.

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Wesley found his mother and sister sprawled on his kitchen floor, on top of his new L.L. Bean blanket, surrounded by a pile of his hand-painted ceramic plates. A pineapple carcass lay on his counter. A frying pan with burnt chunks of scrambled egg sat abandoned on his stove.

"I made a picnic," Krissy announced, popping tiny wedges of pineapple into Margaret's baby bird mouth. "She likes fresh fruit better than applesauce."

"Fresh fruit is a choke risk."

"Oh, she's fine. How do you like her personal grooming upgrade?" Like Vanna White in front of the letter board, Krissy pointed to Margaret's lips, painted rosy pink; her fingernails, filed into neat squares; and her hair, pinned into a lopsided French twist.

Looking up, Margaret smiled at Wesley. Her eyes met his, fully. He could not remember how long it had been since she last smiled at him this way. Just for a second, he sensed his mother still had joy left inside her, that she was truly present, that she knew she was his mother, that she remembered who he'd been, as a child, and who he was now, as a man. Wesley

wanted to move closer, do something, say something—but what? His mother yanked a bobby pin out of her French twist, belched, and looked away. She was gone again.

"Tell that aide to put makeup on her every morning," said Krissy. "Mom will love it."

Wesley grabbed the plate of pineapple chunks and junked it in the sink. "Call her, why don't you? Have a convo about your cosmetics rehabilitation plan."

"Maybe I will."

"What's the aide's name?"

"Is this a quiz?"

"The aide's name is *Cheryl*. I talk to her a couple times *every day*."

Krissy's neck turned blotchy. "And that proves what, exactly? How much you care?"

"You care so much you planned a one-day visit, half of which she'll sleep through. We both know you'd rather visit the Reykjavik hot springs with your fellow artistes than deal with Mom."

Krissy's neck blotches became red welts. "I signed a contract to do this workshop twelve months ago, when Mom was still in Albany. When she still seemed okay."

"*Seemed* being the operative word here."

"You tell me next to nothing; now you shit all over me for not understanding what's going on?"

Wesley felt his face flush.

"You're stingy, you know? With details. About Mom. About your life."

"Since when are you interested in *my* life?"

"You won't let me be interested."

"Oh please."

"How about all those emails I sent you, after Mom told me you got divorced? You couldn't answer any of them?"

It's more than the baby thing, Maureen said the day she moved out. *You don't tell me anything that really matters to you. You don't let me in.* He heard his wife's words as clearly as if she were standing beside him. The truth of her accusation still stung.

"My situation was complicated," Wesley said. "Our mother's situation is complicated."

"You think I'm incapable of understanding *complicated* situations? My whole fucking life is a complicated situation."

Still seated amidst Krissy's picnic spread, Margaret picked up a ceramic plate. Gazing at her two children, she flipped the plate over. Clumps of scrambled egg landed on Wesley's blanket.

Krissy flushed. "We shouldn't do this in front of her."

"She has no idea what's going on."

"She understands more than you think."

"Well, you would know. You've spent a total of—let's see—twelve hours with mom in the past year."

"Here's what I want to know," Krissy said. "When did you turn into such a total dick?"

He needed his sister to disappear. He needed to be alone, in his bedroom, where stark white walls would soothe his brain; where his books, in alphabetic order, lined the walls; where he could raise or lower his custom Levelors to control the brightness and the darkness. "We're done here," he said.

"If you say so, sir." Krissy shook their mother's shoulder. "Want some more pineapple, Mom?"

From his bedroom, Wesley checked Boston.com: flurries tonight, full-on snow starting tomorrow afternoon. Krissy's flight was mid-morning; she'd definitely be able to get out ahead of the storm. Though the prospect of her departure brought his fury down a notch, he still felt unstrung. After a quick foray to his living room dry bar to procure a bottle of Remy Martin, a crystal glass, and a bag of organic blue corn chips, Wesley stretched out, poured a finger, and put on Bach's Third Orchestral Suite. A handful of chips. Another finger. Brandenburg Concerto Number Two. Chips. No voices. No needs. No feelings. Quiet.

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"Wesley?" Krissy was calling from just outside his bedroom door.

He squinted at his watch. Seven p.m.? He must have fallen asleep. This damp spot, this brown stain? He'd spilled his glass of brandy on his white Calvin Klein comforter. Blue corn chips dotted the rug. His legs felt cold. Bare. Apparently, he'd removed his slacks at some point.

"Wes? Can I come in?"

Before he could protest, she stuck her head in the door. "Mom just . . . whoa. What happened in here?"

"Nothing." He pulled the comforter up over his legs. "What is it?"

"Mom just had an accident." Krissy's face was stricken. "It's not pee this time."

Wesley closed his eyes.

"She kind of needs attention. Like soon."

Pulling his pillow over his face, he lay still. He imagined his body dissolving, disappearing limb by limb.

"Earth to Wes."

"Wes isn't here right now. Can I take a message?"

"We could both, you know. Deal with it."

"I can't." He heard his voice catch. "I'm sorry."

He wasn't sure how long she stood in his doorway, waiting, watching the last scraps of his ersatz heroism dissolve. Eventually, he heard water running in the bathtub and Margaret whimpering and Krissy murmuring and his mother crying and Krissy singing "Wheels on the Bus," over and over. The crying stopped. He heard water splashing, then quiet. He waited a full half hour before venturing down the hall to stuff his stained comforter in the washing machine. Opening the bathroom door, braced for chaos, he saw a plastic garbage bag, tied shut, on top of the hamper. He smelled bleach. The tub and tiled floor were spotless.

He found Krissy stretched on the living room couch, a damp washcloth over her eyes. "Well, *that* was gross," she announced.

"Do you need hand sanitizer?"

"I already washed my hands, like, a hundred times."

"Do you want a fresh washcloth? I can grab one out of the dryer."

"You probably wash your towels every day."

"Every other day." He paused. "How is she?"

"Pretty chill. I moved your little TV from the kitchen into her bedroom."

Why had it never occurred to him to get a TV for Margaret? He perched on the edge of the couch. "What inspired your "Wheels on the Bus" serenade?"

"She sang it to me, when I was little. I figured the repetition would calm her down."

"Five stars, by the way," he said. "For the bathroom clean-up."

She gave a short laugh. "I should've taken before and after pictures."

"Thank you. For sparing me."

Removing the washcloth, Krissy cocked her head at her brother. "Why do people want to have kids, anyway? You'd think the prospect of having to clean up their shit for so many years would be a deterrent."

Wesley gave a thin smile. "You'd think."

"That elephant wallpaper in the bedroom seems all decked out for a kid."

"That was the plan."

"Why did you bail? On the kid thing, I mean."

He'd been resolutely silent for so long—about his disabled sperm; his anguish at failing his wife; his fear of not being able to abide the messy and chaotic unpredictability of a baby—but here sat his sister, smelling of bleach, wrung out, asking him a direct question, and he needed to answer her. He wanted to answer her. "We tried. It just didn't happen."

"I guess that sucked."

"Pretty much."

Krissy was watching him. "Are you okay?"

Wesley took a silent deep breath, held it, and exhaled to the count of five, waiting to feel his lungs deflate fully. "No."

Krissy looked him square in the eyes. "You can't keep her here, Wes. Not for long, anyway."

He nodded, relieved she said it first.

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When Krissy swooped into the kitchen at five-thirty the next morning, clad in a turquoise caftan, blue hair slicked straight back, red lipstick perfectly applied, Wesley had a platter of buckwheat and spelt pancakes waiting. "This snow is intense," he said. "You might want to switch your flight to tomorrow. Or Monday."

She glanced at her phone. "My Uber's scheduled to be here in twenty minutes."

"Have some breakfast, at least?"

Krissy began texting, both thumbs flying. "I'll grab something on the plane."

Hurt, he ripped off a sheet of tin foil and busied himself sealing the pancake platter. "Who's coming to your thing in Reykjavik?" he asked.

"My *thing*?"

"Your show. Your master class. Whatever."

"Mostly grad students. MFA types."

"What exactly are you doing?"

"Deconstructing scenes. From a María Irene Fornés play, some Dorfman stuff."

"Any idea when you could get back to Boston?"

"My schedule's crazy," she said, eyes still on her screen. "Late July, maybe?"

July? He'd been hoping, foolishly, for March. "I'll start researching options," he told her.

She looked up. "Options?"

"For Mom."

Krissy brightened. "Hey, I read this article once, about people in assisted living programs getting into relationships. Hooking up, even. If anybody wearing a diaper could find herself a new gentleman friend, it'd be Mom."

Wesley pressed two fingers to his temple. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that."

Krissy laughed. "Stranger things have happened."

Tapping his watch, he pointed towards Margaret's bedroom door.

"I know." Krissy sighed. "I know."

When Krissy led her mother into the living room minutes later, Margaret was sporting a black Mary Kay suit jacket on top of her spaghetti-stained pajamas. "She wanted to wear something nice for our goodbye dance," Krissy said.

"Dance?"

She handed Wesley her phone. "Go to Spotify. I already picked the song."

As Krissy led their mother to the center of his parquet floor, Wesley pressed play, and Frank Sinatra began to sing. Krissy wrapped her mother in a bear hug. The two of them began to sway.

Come fly with me, let's float down to Peru
In llama-land there's a one-man band
And he'll toot his flute for you
Come fly with me, let's take off in the blue.[1]

"In the blue," Margaret shouted, waving one arm as if conducting the band.

"I knew you'd remember this song," Krissy said.

His mother was grinning like a fool. Wesley yearned to joined them, but he was not a dancer. Should he cut in? Could he dance with them both? The logistics felt complicated. He settled for bobbing his head, slightly, to the music.

When the song ended, Krissy bowed to her mother with a flourish. "Thank you, Madame."

Squaring her bony shoulders, Margaret straightened her jacket lapels. "Blue girl," she pointed at her daughter. Blue came out like *boo*.

"Oh my god, Mom." Krissy touched her cobalt-blue hair, her turquoise caftan. "You're absolutely right."

Margaret turned to Wesley. "Blue boy," she said, pulling the corners of her mouth down like a sad circus clown.

Startled, he put his hand to his mouth. Was his melancholy so obvious?

"I knew music would activate something in her brain." Krissy sounded ecstatic. "Blue girl, blue boy? She nailed us."

"Yeah," he said, sadly. So much for his hope of being hailed as the hero, the loyal son, the man who got the job done. Still, he felt drawn to the image of them as a set, a pair. Soon this blue girl would be his only family.

Braced for a scene, Wesley was relieved Krissy kept her exit as business-like as her entrance had been dramatic. When a text pinged saying her Uber was five minutes away, she simply scooped up her alpaca coat, motioned Wesley to take her suitcase, leaned in to give her mother a kiss, and whispered something in her ear. Looking dazed, Margaret picked at a thread on her suit jacket sleeve.

"Does she know you're . . ."

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1. "Come Fly with Me," composed by Jimmy Van Heusen, with lyrics by Sammy Cahn

Krissy cut him off. "Just let her be."

He nodded. What was the point? He'd just have to repeat himself over and over: *Krissy's leaving, Krissy just left, Krissy's your daughter, Krissy's gone now*. He didn't have the heart for it, not today. "I'll wait with you," he said.

Outside, they shivered side by side in the darkness. "You sure your flight hasn't been cancelled?" asked Wesley.

"Totally sure." Krissy scanned the empty street. "My Uber's late. If he no-shows, can you drive me to Logan?"

"I can't leave Mom alone for that long."

"Oh. Right. Sorry."

"I tried leaving her alone once, just to pick up my dry cleaning."

"And?"

"Big mistake. She burned her hand fiddling around with my expresso machine. Every time I see that scar I feel like crap."

"Hey, remember Mom's snow day parties? She'd serve us hot chocolate, on a blanket in front of the fireplace."

Wesley nodded. "She floated miniature marshmallows on top."

"God yes. All melty and gooey."

"Remember when I made Mom breakfast in bed, for Mother's Day?"

"Mostly I remember you flipping out on me for spilling that carton of orange juice."

Closing his eyes, he sees the scene. His skinny seven-year-old self, so small he needs a chair to reach the kitchen counter, on a mission to make a perfect breakfast for his mother. Three-year-old Krissy, in sneakers with blinking pink lights on the heels, stamping her foot into her puddle of pulpy juice, laughing as she splashes, saying *I want the sky to rain orange juice!* He's swatting her rear end. *Behave*, he tells her. *Behave*. Even after he delivers his tray of buttered raisin toast, cheerios with sliced banana, and a glass of Tang, even after their mother hugs him and proclaims his breakfast delicious, even after his sister drapes a dishtowel around her shoulders and darts off to play superman, he is ruminating. If only his sister hadn't spilled the juice, he could have served his mother fresh orange juice instead of that lukewarm Tang.

"I was kind of a dick even back then," he said.

Krissy smiled. "Only sometimes."

Before he can say more, headlights slice through the darkness. With the fervor of a child wishing on a birthday cake candle, he wills the car to pass them by. She can't go yet. It's not fair. He needs more time with her, now that he has so much more to say. But she is waving the car over to the curb and suddenly Wesley is hoisting her suitcase into the trunk, and he is reaching out to hug her, breathing in the patchouli wafting up from her small frame, resting his chin on top of her head, wanting to linger longer, but she is pulling away, hopping in the back seat, barking at the driver to freaking hurry, and soon all he can see is her cobalt hair, disappearing. *Wait*, he wants to call out. *Wait!*

FOOTWASHERS

JESSE NATHAN

The waiting and dreamed-of ritual grace . . .
—Valerie Weaver-Zercher

Stout as a dancehall, white clapboard and square
It stood between wheat fields a short piece from town,
Bordered by gravel, abut by God's acre—
This roominess anchored by pews. Through which wound
Mother in her special vamps
And Daddy in his monkstraps
To where a line of basins wait,

Warmish water lapping and the linen towels draped
Where feet of different walks have gathered, foot-foundered
And fit alike, for each soul to cradle, douse, and bathe
Their righthand neighbor's heel, instep, digits found
Immaculate or blooming lint
Or faint funk or toenail paint.
Footloose, nailmangled, gimp—

Most everybody's here. There's Auntie, who pronounces it
Play-zure as she communes with Sue the drama coach,
And Uncle, who keeps fake owls in his garden, who quizzes
Tom the sheriff (who's ticklish) as he sprinkles his toes,
And down-at-heel Jason, who yesterday
Hunted mallards up a slough, splays
His shovels to a wingtipped banker,

And there—there I am, turning over a word
In my head—*catenary*—for parabolas that fountains
Form, word for the U a necklace makes, curve
An upside-down arch, as I towel off a sprouting
Cousin's fallen arches, anklebone,
All thirty-three joints known and unknown
That carry you away from home.

STILL LIFE IN DENIAL

GEORGE UBA

About winter, the snow leopard
guessed right. Likewise the
cunning fox crouched in August's lair,

invisible as a coming heatstroke.
It won't play pretty. Unlike the leaves
preparing somersaults upon release.

How long will it take, the child once asked.
It was long ago. It was later
you unpacked the guest towels.

Later you polished the good silver
to keep your hands occupied.
As expected, the pitcher was brimming

with the thank-yous-for-coming.
The child did not mean the surgery
but how long would it take for the stillness

to break. And you thought of the leopard
folded into snow, the brittle gone leaves,
the fox that could move fast whenever it wanted to.

TEACHING PURITANISM AT THE MILLENNIUM

GEORGE UBA

Most were fresh out of high school when I gave them a dose
of Jonathan Edwards, which I swear, though not to God, made the anthology a lot heavier
than it appeared, while resting among the stacks in the bookstore.

Two knew God as the reason they narrowly escaped a collision on the 405.
Therefore, He was not angry, only sometimes impatient, as they were, with rush hour.
And Sinners intrigued everyone until they could not locate the good passages describing sin.

It wasn't their fault. Why should they listen to elders long-winded and relentlessly sincere?
The Bachelorette was on later that night. I kept my lecture brief. Threw in some jokes.

In high school I put my faith in sincerity,
actually believed it was enough to get dates, despite evidence to the contrary.
In my final semester, we held class elections so that standouts might receive more acclaim.
One contest was for Most Sincere. I did not win. Maybe I did not get any votes,

I don't know, and half a century later, no one's going back to check.

But after a while, Edwards sort of crept up on the kids. In much the way
his quiet, dramatic delivery must have crept up on the tidy congregants at Enfield
until they shuddered with fear, and several cast themselves prostrate in the aisles
in abject terror over the state of their un-reborn souls. Sincerity was a bitter rod

to wield above such youthful heads, but I wasn't trying to convert them, just gain
their attention for a sec and make them see, as Edwards wanted his followers to see,
that even seeing was not enough to save.
It wasn't. It led to nothing short of terror, which I mentioned op cit above.
In Puritanism only the Elect are saved.

Before the end of class, the students were awake. For a while they stopped texting.
For a while they stopped surfing the internet while hidden behind their laptops.

I always liked these young students. I always liked the way stern Edwards made them bat
damnation and the feeble light of hope back and forth between their ears
like a soulful ping-pong ball predestined to land on one side of the net or the other,
while the player, whatever the result, was forced to keep playing.

I wouldn't call every election fair.
I find it impossible to predict results. Most Sincere
was one of those secondary elections behind Best Looking and Most Likely to Succeed.

But back then it meant enough to make one wonder
if errors of the past affected the outcome or if winning was a sign of
being saved.

To this day I don't know the precise metrics of sincerity.

Probably I did not receive a single vote.

BITTER JOY

JONATHAN GLEASON

The last summer I lived in Columbus was a summer I spent working for a landscaping company in a town called West Jefferson. The center of operations was only thirty minutes from my parents' house but might as well have been another country. On one of my first days, I stopped at the side of the road where a disk of fog was turning over a soybean field. I had never seen anything like it. I got out of the car to bend and run my hands through the mist.

It was a shit job, though, brutal and poorly paid. Most days we were dispatched to lay mulch or plant trees at rich country homes with private ponds and huge novelty windmills. The trees were always crying pungent crab apples that I'd find down my shirt or in my underwear later. We worked for 12 dollars an hour or 18 after overtime kicked in, which most men counted on, meaning we worked from dawn until dusk Monday through Thursday, Friday if we wanted.

No one told me how to dress or what to bring, so I showed up on the first day in tennis shoes, gym shorts and a T-shirt. By noon, a shovel had bitten through the soft rubber of my sole and cracked it along the bridge, the sun had fried the back of my calves and triceps to a tender pink, and I'd drunk and sweated out more water than twice what my pathetic 16-ounce water bottle could hold. I wound up stretched out in the back of a mulch truck humiliated, on the verge of heatstroke.

One of the men I'd been working with—Joel—came over to give me some advice. I was too tired to sit up, so he loomed over me, hands on his hips. He told me to wear jeans tomorrow even if it was hot. He told me to

get a handkerchief for the back of my neck and proper boots for stomping on a shovel. He told me to buy gloves unless I wanted to get blisters and let them thicken into calluses. Then he shoved a milk jug, which he'd rinsed and filled with water, into my lap. Its core was still frozen and rattled around like a tiny iceberg in my lap. "Make one of those too," he said. "And for God's sake, give yourself a break."

That was the same summer I became friends with Marc. He was a few years older than me, had just dropped out of college, moved home, and started sleeping with one of my best friends. Sometimes I would imagine them in the back seat of his car. She'd told me that's where they'd done it. She was worried because they hadn't used a condom.

This must have been why he was over at my house one night when my parents were away. She'd invited him. We were all three standing in the kitchen when he took out a foggy sandwich bag full of pills and offered us some.

We couldn't take them whole, though. There was some chemical in them, he said, that would damage our livers. He went to work on them like a chemist, requesting a bread knife, a mug, and a washcloth. He used the flat end of the knife to crush a series of pills, wiped the blade clean with his thumb, and sucked the residue off like a child. I wanted him to offer it to me: the powdered end of his finger. He had that effect on people. He was handsome, but it was more than that. He had a charming opiated calm, a faint lisp and a nickel-wide gap between his front teeth. He slept with whomever he wanted, or that was the rumor. This fluidity was intimidating; its uncertainty made it legend. When he looked at you, it was like being sized up against the rest of the world.

He warmed a pot of water over a claw of blue flames, dissolved the pills in the water, and then, with the washcloth, strained out whatever chemicals we didn't want. We passed the mug around cupping it tenderly, sipping at it like hummingbirds, then went into the garage and sat in an old Fiat two-seater that my grandfather had been repairing before he died. My friend sat in Marc's lap as we waited for something to happen. I didn't mind that they were kissing or that her heels kept digging into my thighs. The truth was revealing itself in turns. I watched as a collection of bottles and paint cans turned into a city. The orange light pouring in through the window turned

slick as Crisco over the surfaces it touched. Shadows grew a fleecy skin, so deep I could plunge my fingers into them. It was all so obvious: the future, the past lined up with the soft clink of a cue ball before a shot lands. My hands went numb, and I said out loud, "I can see everything," which hung in the car's interior, ignored.

I could see our fates—the doom and promise of each of them. We would not be lifelong friends, I knew that, and some of us would live very short lives. I forgot most of this later. It passed out of me like a dream. I thought about mentioning it to them as it occurred to me, but it hadn't seemed worth interrupting them.

When I took the landscaping job, I was only eighteen, twelve years younger than anyone else on the crew, which earned me the name Junior. The landscaping company was a halfway house for reformed convicts and recovering addicts. The owner was himself a former heroin addict and now lived in a large country house on the connected property. His company offered a second chance to people who undoubtedly needed one but also profited off the cheap labor and limited options of the down and out.

Some of the men had tattoos on their necks and calves that, from sun damage and time, had spread and thinned into the formlessness of bruises. I remember a woman coming out of her house as we worked to complain about them—the tattoos, the men. She told them to roll down their pant legs and put on long-sleeved shirts in the heat. Some of the men took weekly drug tests as part of the condition of their employment. On the weekends they served mandatory community service and had meetings with parole officers, which they would recount standing in a circle smoking in the gray, emulsive dawn before we shipped out.

If my father, who had gotten me the job, knew any of this, he didn't let on. Growing up in the 1960s, in a house with seven children and one income, he had traditional notions about manual labor, hard work, and character building. But, of course, only those of us who don't have to work to survive get to work to build character.

This divide between work for pleasure and work to build character isn't new, and it tracks with uncomfortable predictability the way we have always assigned victimhood or blame to addiction. In the nineteenth century, opium was the drug of choice for both agricultural laborers in the Fenland

and Romantic poets in the Lake District. The poets were interested in the stimulating effect opium had on their imaginations (the sounds, visions, and strange synesthetic blurring opium could provoke). The laborers used it as a medicine to dull the muscular pain that resulted from their work. But while both groups' addictions were equally debilitating, only the laborers were depicted as weak-constituted gluttons prone to addiction. The poets, already rich and well positioned, instead had their vices romanticized in confessional memoirs.

I don't think anyone in the firm bothered to learn my real name. I didn't mind, but it seemed to portend all the ways I had been promised a different life. I lived in the suburbs, in a community that had gentrified and shed its reputation as an "unsafe neighborhood" during the first ten years of my life. I could not articulate these feelings then, but I had the distinct sense that I was touring through others' lives, and I experienced this as a moral failing. I noticed how the son of a dentist—"a rich boy"—was despised, and I worried about being despised too. The men I worked with didn't hate me. For the most part they ignored me, but I was mocked for the car I drove (a used Volvo), for the sunscreen I applied (every few hours), and for the food I ate (derisively referred to as "four-dollar bread"). The mocking was never cruel, though; in fact, now it seems to me more than fair.

Some weeks we would be sent to Cincinnati, a two-hour drive in the boxy mulch trucks, through miles of waist-high corn, their cobs like overstuffed cigars. There was an unspoken intimacy to these trips. I would fall asleep on Joel's shoulder and wake up to him snoring. Or I would sit in the front seat where he would teasingly offer me cigarettes before taking a long popping drag. "Don't get hooked on anything Junior," he would say, followed by, "these things are full of fiberglass." I was young enough that I believed him for a long time.

Joel was a check fraudster and some kind of rogue genius. He lived with his sister and brother-in-law somewhere in West Jefferson. He showed me how to dig different sized holes with the greatest economy. He told me to put talcum powder in my socks and gave me a tin of mink oil to massage into the seams of my boots to protect against the rain and mud. He taught me to untangle the roots of boxwoods, which came wrapped around themselves like straitjackets from their black plastic coffins. I had never been so

out of depth at anything in my life, nor had I ever felt the sharp, sardonic comraderie of a friend quite like Joel. Brash, ostentatiously masculine, unapologetic. I basked in his acceptance—even if he just enjoyed bossing someone around.

Joel said there was plenty he could teach me and was always imparting wisdom about what he called the "bleak underbelly of the world." Once, as we were finishing a job at a bank branch, long after close, we watched two cars pull into the parking lot. A man in a baggy suit and flip flops got out of the first car and gave something to the person waiting in the second car. "That's a drug deal, Junior," Joel said, clapping me on the shoulder. I was skeptical of this at first, but then he would know a lot better than me.

Sports loomed large in Joel's life. They were the source of both his greatest pride and deepest failure. The check fraud was what had finally landed him in prison for sixteen months, but he had priors that I vaguely knew were related to drugs. In college, he had played football on scholarship at a small Division III school. He wasn't a starter, but he was good. After getting injured he had started using steroids to keep up, but the drugs made him reckless. He skipped too many practices and nearly failed out of school. After being ejected from the team, he dropped out and started using. He told me this as I shook a protein shake for him on a ride back to base camp, in the tone of someone wronged, someone for whom life's promises had been proven a lie. "Mother fucker!" he said of his coach, as if an argument were freshening itself with painful clarity in his mind. I could tell he wasn't talking to me anymore.

I knew that Joel had a daughter. In my mind, she was a pale, curly-haired blonde in a summer dress, though I can't remember if he ever showed me a picture. It doesn't seem like something he would do, but then children can change everything about a man. I do know that he would be absent from work some days. "Custody hearing," someone told me once, and I knew he would be back late, in a bad mood, snapping at anyone who dared to come near him. On one particularly bad day, he joined up with us in the early evening, after all the white collar workers had left for the day, and, fifteen minutes into stabbing uselessly at the ground to dig a trench for a row of bushes, he abandoned his work, went over to the mulch truck, and swung his shovel like a baseball bat into its plate metal side, leaving a wide v-shaped scar and

a litter of red paint chips on the blacktop. In the long hollow ringing that followed, everyone looked down at their feet, ashamed.

The species of pain I experienced landscaping was like nothing I'd known before. This was not the round satisfying pain of sore muscles or the sharp dry stab of desperate lungs that I was familiar with from running competitively for years. The pain of landscaping was gnawing and useless—a bitter and fluid ache that lived in my joints and tendons. It was the pain of repetitive labor, the pain of crouching and shoveling and digging, a pain that would wake me up before dawn, my hip flexors cramping like a much older man's.

It is difficult to talk about pain without talking about poppies. Opium, morphine, heroin, codeine, OxyContin—designed to solve the problem of pain without causing addiction—are all derived from poppies, and each have their war. Morphine was invented in 1804, but it became the drug of choice during the Civil War, used to control both dysentery and pain. Heroin was the drug of punk rock and the Vietnam War and cities collapsing under their own weight. Now, most poppies are grown in Afghanistan; during infrastructure projects of the 1960s, the water table of the country was destroyed, forcing salt to the surface. The salt rendered land that had been farmed for years untenable, but the bitter soil with its dry, gritty constitution was uniquely suited for poppies. OxyContin became the drug of my youth, as well as the drug of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was the drug of working-class Appalachia and southern Ohio. It appeared to be new, though the premise it was built on was not new at all. Like its predecessors, it was derived from the alkaloid of the poppy plant and promised to solve the problem of pain without the unwanted side effects of addiction. But one of the natural laws of opiates seems to be that no matter how their molecules are tweaked, no matter how slowly their active ingredients are meted out, they give rise to both profound joy and profound addiction.

Marc knew about pain too. He worked loading boxes for a shipping company and on the floor of American Eagle in one of the three malls that surrounded Columbus. Sometimes we would talk about what this work was doing to our bodies: him shoving boxes around on conveyor belts all day, me on my knees picking through roots. Back pain was the worst, we both agreed. It had a uniquely sickening quality.

We were friends, but not the kind of friends who called each other or made plans without the auspice of a group. I still have his phone number—stored like a residual memory in my phone—but I don't think I ever had an occasion to use it. Most often, I would run into him at house parties. I never knew where he was going to turn up, but I arrived everywhere harboring the secret hope that he would be there.

I saw him once at a party that was coming apart at the seams. People had spilled out onto the front lawn hollering and crushing beer cans against their foreheads, the host was making out with someone on the living room couch, and the rest of us were wandering the hallways. I found him in a bedroom, unhooking a laptop from where it was charging on a desk. He looked over when I came in but didn't seem surprised to see me at all. It was like he'd been waiting for someone to find him.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked, shutting the door against the noise behind me.

But he either hadn't heard me or hadn't understood.

"Come listen to this," he said instead, lowering himself slowly to the ground with a pained grunt. He arranged the laptop, between one knee and the floor, then he played me a song from YouTube, "Everything in Its Right Place" by Radiohead.

Now, with ten years of hindsight, I know how much he loved Radiohead, this song in particular. Now, I've read ten years of his Facebook statuses: ten years of loneliness both real and performed, ten years of complaints about the daily pain of retail and shipping work, ten years of birthday wishes and song lyrics. I think we love music more when we're young because we believe in the promise of music to transform us, to make us as profound as the lyrics we love. Which is another way to say we love music because we are so impatient to grow up.

"I woke up sucking a lemon," Thom Yorke sings in "Everything in Its Right Place." *So true! But what does it mean?* we wondered. As we sat on the floor, listening again, the quiet of the room made more palpable by the party still rumbling below us like a great unsteady machine.

On days we were not called out to private properties, I drove a truck with a multi-ton tank of water strapped onto the bed—a coveted job. I would travel from property to property, following behind the landscaping crew,

watering the bushes and saplings that they'd just put in the ground. It was easy, even if it made me nervous hauling that much weight around. Half the highways that summer were under construction and narrowed with orange cones and cement barriers. I was careful to make sure the tank was always full or else the back wheels would fishtail with the sloshing of water.

I listened to the radio as I drove. That summer the National's "Bloodbuzz Ohio" played every hour on certain radio stations. Songs from Arcade Fire's forthcoming album—*The Suburbs*—were sprinkled over the months. It was two years after the housing market had collapsed and dragged the banks along with them. Lines like "I still owe money to the money I owe" had a twisted koan-like truth to their logic, even though I—a recent high school graduate—had never owed any real money. That summer we signed for student loans, which would eventually break some of my friends. The residual wisdom, a product of 1980s interest rates, was to take anything they offered. Four years and six months felt like a lifetime away, even if those principal sums would swell with time.

Other days, we worked hauling dead shrubs from the lawns of banks in the Bottoms—a neighborhood so named because it lies below the waterline of the surrounding rivers and is susceptible to periodic flooding. The homes and businesses there are built under the assumption of destruction and subject to predatory loans and high insurance rates. Or they were, until a flood wall was built along the freeway, two breweries moved into the neighborhood, and blocks started to be razed and gentrified. Now it is considered one of Columbus's up-and-coming neighborhoods, and people who have made their lives there are being shifted out.

Perhaps we were a part of that coming change, but we couldn't see it at the time. All we could see was an old man pushing a shopping cart down the cracked sidewalk and a woman who pulled into the parking lot across from us one morning and emptied out the contents of her car—fast food containers, stuffed animals, laundry baskets full of clothes, cheap picture frames, a whole life—onto a patch of grass before driving away.

I felt like I was always working. But when I wasn't, we were smoking in garage bedrooms or drinking at a wood-paneled bar called Ledo's. We were reckless, but not in any particularly interesting ways. Some days we drove down to the quarter mile—a stretch of freeway that doubled back on itself

in such a tight curve it was impossible for cops to patrol. It circled a man-made lake with a little chain of condos draped over a peninsula at its center. We liked to see what speed we could reach before the freeway ran out. I never drove, but I would sit in the passenger's seat and watch out the window. Wild geese passing over the lake. Steam rising off the asphalt after a summer rain.

"As an object approaches the speed of light, time slows down." Marc was the kind of person who would openly share thoughts like this. Grand, unprovable thoughts about time, the universe, God. He delivered these ideas with such a lack of pretense that they were never annoying. I had heard this before, of course, without giving it much thought, but racing down that stretch of road felt like a proof of concept. At 90 miles an hour, the city and its reflection turned over the water like a figurine on a mirrored plate.

What can I say about that city? At the time it was vibrating with a mounting boom. My parents, who bought their house for 90,000 dollars from a man in prison in the early 1990s, rode this rising tide like a raft of foam. Everywhere developers were paying off bureaucrats and planning ways to displace neighborhoods. The prices of huge tracts of homes were changing under our feet. But at those speeds this felt like an arbitrary blip. We could already see the city raptured and empty . . . the thin wash of tropical sea that had once covered this region . . . the glaciers furrowing the earth, plowing boulders hundreds of miles to rest at the feet of hills . . . the Appalachians peaking like the Rockies, then wearing themselves smooth with time . . . at those speeds we would never have to see our future.

Pain medication was everywhere overnight—left over from hip surgeries, triple bypasses, and tonsillectomies. I barely registered this. No one was talking about addiction. Drugs were the dime bags of weed people bought on campus, not a bottle you could have filled at the pharmacy with a prescription.

I remember, one night, taking drinks from a large bottle of codeine in a dining room with some friends. The liquid stained the sides of the bottle a fierce orange. A glass hutch filled with crystal figurines gently announced our movements. We measured the liquid out with a hollow plastic spoon, then walked to our high school's track and field to lie out and feel the effects.

A decade later, my friend tells me that her father had noticed the

missing liquid and accused her mother, an addict, of the theft. "I didn't know that," I say, lost for an adequate response. The youthful trespass of that moment doesn't square with what I now know of the epidemic, and I feel as though I've just been reminded of some money I once borrowed and forgot to repay—a debt so old and now so large it would be uncomfortable, even impossible, to pay back.

By this time, I was regularly receiving texts from friends warning of drugs laced with unknown chemicals. "Fentanyl found in a brick of cocaine in Columbus," one friend wrote, accompanied by a link to an article and a screenshot of the most pertinent information. These texts were sent as chain messages, a scattershot sent to tens of people at once, an underground alarm system trying to filter its way to the most vulnerable. Newspapers were filled with pictures of men and women overdosing in shopping malls and parking lots and parks. In one particularly famous picture a child sits strapped into his booster seat in the back of a van. He's very young, blond, slightly buck toothed, and wearing a blue dinosaur T-shirt, which clashes with his adult expression of uncertainty and worry. His grandmother and her boyfriend hang in a hammock of their seat belts up front. Their mouths are open. One of her bra straps is limp around her shoulder. The officer who pulled the couple over took the picture after the driver fell unconscious. The photograph, released without their consent, was picked up by *TIME* magazine and became one of the defining images of the epidemic.

"Photographs of victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric," writes Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. "They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus." Sontag was writing about images of war, but she might just as well have been writing about addiction—a problem that the US government has confronted with the violent single-mindedness of a war. If these photos brought attention to the crisis, it was attention stripped of humanity and glossed over by spectacle. If they have helped achieve small justices against the pharmaceutical companies that pumped cities full of addictive drugs, they have also been distractions from any real justice or recovery. If they worked to elicit empathy, they also inspired blame. *How could they endanger a child like that?* was the tone of the responses I heard regarding the *TIME* magazine picture. Addiction, as always, is poised in the delicate space between illness and self-destruction, between victimhood and blame. And, of course, what role one

is assigned is not meted out randomly or evenly but along lines of race and class.

In 1986, after Reagan described the new epidemic of crack cocaine as an "uncontrolled fire," he did not go on to discuss the victims of addiction, the Black communities ravaged by a drug brought to the country, however indirectly, by its own Central Intelligence Agency. Instead, he discussed how drugs menaced America's children and were not in fact a "victimless crime." The policies, inherited from the Nixon administration and amplified under Reagan, lead to a surge of incarceration for even petty drug crimes. And if the war on drugs campaign of the 1980s and '90s was based on punishment and fear, the opioid epidemic has become a campaign of pity and disdain. In 2011, just as the breadth of the opioid supply chain was entering public awareness, executives from AmerisourceBergen—a wholesale pharmaceutical distributor responsible for flooding Appalachia with opioids—were rewriting the lyrics of *The Beverly Hillbillies* theme song to include phrases like "hillbilly heroin" and "pillbillies."

Disdain might be preferable to criminalization, but neither approach solves the problem of addiction, and both betray the way addicts have been viewed in the past, as either violent enemies or worthless.

On the last day I worked with Joel, he didn't say anything about leaving. Maybe he didn't know; he lived that sort of life, bold and impulsive, ready at a moment's notice to ride off into the sunset with all the grand self-importance the image implies. He always seemed happiest at the beginning of things. Even in the mornings, a day of predictable drudgery laid out before us, he was bright and energetic, loading the mulch truck with his enviable athleticism, like anything could happen.

I don't know if he ever worked out an agreement to see his daughter. I don't know where he ended up. I never even knew his last name. The next day he was simply gone. "Took a job in Florida," someone said, noticing my confusion. It sounded more like speculation than a statement. Besides the foremen, everyone was transient. They worked the job until they found a better one or a different one. It wasn't worth trying to track with any certainty others' plans. The last thing he would say every day was "Take care of yourself, Junior." He would call it through his open window as he drove off in a hiss of gravel. That was probably the last thing he said to me.

The rumor I heard was that the paramedics found Marc in a closet, though it may have been a bathroom. They either performed CPR, or did not. They may have had Narcan, or they may not. The rumor, later confirmed, was that he had been nursing a heroin addiction. That was the word people used, *nurse*, as if it were something tender and wounded that you had to feed with an eye dropper. Paramedics rushed him to a hospital, and he survived. That much is certain. He spent several months in rehab and recovered.

We tend to think of pain as the domain of the body rather than the mind, but now I am not so sure how clean these distinctions are. Opiates' ability to dissolve pain and weave intense pleasure suggests that our minds and bodies are not separate entities at all and that relief from pain and addiction are somehow tightly interwoven. Depressed patients experience higher sensitivity to pain than non-depressed patients, for example. They are also prone to back pain, headaches, and unexplained nerve sensitivity. And anyone who has experienced long-term physical pain understands that it can lead to anguish.

Maybe this understanding isn't new. Maybe it's ancient. Maybe we've known it all along. In *The Iliad*, Helen pours the drug nepenthe (literally "to chase away sorrow") into the wine of mourners who have come to cry over the lost soldiers of the Trojan War, and iced poppy tea is still—in some parts of the world—traditionally served at funerals as a balm not for the body but the soul. Even common over-the-counter drugs meant for bodily pain have been shown to block emotional pain.

It was not heroin that killed Marc. Though, in the endless ouroboros of addiction and pain, it must have played a part. He went to rehab, got sober, returned to the world. There was no relapse. He died in his home at twenty-seven, in 2016, the result of a mental illness he struggled with his whole life.

Of the many surprising features of the brief obituary that ran in the wake of Marc's death—its frankness, its specificity: *He stayed sober for two years, three months and 23 days*—I am most surprised by the way his sobriety was described by his family. They called it something "earned," something that required "hard work" to maintain. "He entered eternity drug free," they say. A phrase, my friend suggests, that borders on moralizing.

There is language that is often deployed around addiction, language that is uncannily similar to the way we glamorize physical labor. The language of bootstraps, perseverance, and hard work. It glosses over the messy,

unsteady truth of addiction and recovery just as it euphemizes the often brutal and exploitative work of physical labor, labor that is both idealized and dismissed in the same thought.

The last time I saw Marc was in a parking garage of a friend's apartment. It was the summer before his first overdose. He sat in the back seat of my car, waiting for someone to get a bottle of whiskey from their freezer, with his eyes locked on the rearview mirror. He was still working the shipping job. His arms were vascular and tight, a lean strength developed from repetitive motions. It looked like something had chewed away all the fat from below his skin. He rubbed his throbbing veins as he spoke. Did his back still ache? I didn't ask. But I, too, would have taken something to cure it.

He told me work was going well, that things were looking up, that if he could just hold on a little longer, soon he'd be going places. He didn't plan to be there forever.

HIBERNACULA PARABLE

LESLIE HARRISON

& everything increases the wars the numbers the cities

& doors admit people into houses

& gates exclude people from the lands

& we make snow globes those perfect lives under glass

& we imagine skates gliding happily forever across thin ice

& the lights are always on always golden

& beacons steady in their welcome

& the ice never breaks

& nobody goes under

& the fish see etchings in the sky contrails carved by shadows and blades

& there are no planes no roaring silver birds no towers

& even violence causes only weather

& the next storm coats the town with glitter and prism

& even a toy is a lesson in secrets

& the fish are an uncertainty experiment

& deep in the pond we pretend a shipwreck

& the fish are all named Heisenberg

& the people are made unknowable made entirely of secrets

& the absence of touch

& somewhere in the scene a frog has frozen solid

& sugar prevents ice from breaking his heart

& his voice in the spring will be mighty

& spring will never come to the globe

& the one gesture of a tree

& the bare branch the bird endlessly perching

& nobody has to stop skating

& put away the skates and leave the beautiful snow

& go through a doorway

& into another world

& the people glide between the golden lights and the golden fish

& live in sudden storms of shining snow

& they're cradled in distant unreachable hands

& pierced by ice

& saved by sweetness

EXIT PLAN

DIANA ABU-JABER

It's that time again.
I feel it
like a lost wedding band:
I'm not Muslim, I don't wear a veil.
Doesn't matter.
That box is big, it contains multitudes.
I'd almost forgotten
After years of a kind of calm.
Years of feeling like who you think you are is who you are,
Now that old creature exhales from the crack in the mirror.
The "random checks,"
The searched luggage.
The arms-out, legs-apart,
The I'm going to pat your pockets now.
That time we were held for hours in the "back" at the Canadian border.
That time we were held for hours in the "back" at the Miami airport.
Once again, they'll be saying who we are.
When someone tacked threats on my office door,
My friends begged:
Change your name, why not change it?
Why don't I change it?
Just a lost daughter, among a nation of lost daughters,
Claimed by a name I didn't make.

My Bedouin relatives were born under a burning moon on a scoured desert.
The moon there is bright as a knuckle. It bites like teeth.
The moon scours us down to essence, leaves us shining, undeniable.
If you've forgotten who you are, you have to go to torn up, wild places like this,
The empty quarters, the silent spaces.
I was raised in my mother's Catholicism
And I asked my father:
Didn't that hurt you?
No, he said.
Because people who believe
They belong to one family of faith.
Faith in what, Dad?
Oh, he said, faith in the animals,
Faith in the green world.
In the pointed stars
And in the spaces between the stars.
Faith holds the question, he said.
What's the question, dad?
It's the question, he said.
When you have faith
You embrace the question,
Live inside of it.
Love it.

* * *

Listen,
In the stillest part of the desert,
Far from the moon,
Wind, horses and night.
Far away from question and answer,
Far from you and me,
There is a seed.
Every time they get you wrong is a seed.

Every name hidden is a seed.
Every word unspoken, a seed.
The seeds are bitter,
And sharp,
They grow in eyes and throats.
Eat them and you may die.
Scatter them,
High and wide.
And they will call down the rain.

CANADA

MICHAEL SOUTHARD

Two boys, sitting on a bed, controllers in their hands. On the table I see chip bags, matted cellophane, loose weed, a pink bong. There would be books strewn around the dorm—fiction, nonfiction—but the only book I can pin to that freshman winter has the title *The Fatal Shore*. When I think back on that night now, more than a decade after the fact, I can remember names, places, the major events. But mostly I'm left with blank pages. I am trying to fill me in.

Jeremy knocked his kart into mine. I slipped him a banana peel.

"Fucker," he muttered, before covering my eyes.

I know it was a Saturday night in January, 2009. I remember there was a dance party happening just down the hall, but we hadn't been invited. We'd found that if we put a towel beneath the door and kept the Nintendo's volume up high, we could keep the reek from getting out and the world from getting in. At the tony liberal arts school we attended up in Maine, we were anomalies for our shyness, our inability to ski. We spent most of our time squirrelled away in the basement of Donner Library, where Jeremy was studying biology, and I was mostly studying movies. To the extent that anybody knew us, they knew us as life-clumsy, apologetic, super nice, inseparable.

We had no plans that night, as usual, which was fine, or it was whatever, we had our weed to smoke. But the later it got, the louder the dance party got, and the harder it was to ignore. Over the pounding of the music and the whine of our fake engines, I heard myself floating the idea of going for an actual drive.

"Like where?" Jeremy said.

"Anywhere," I said.

I was anxious. That day I would have had the usual Saturday afternoon phone call from my parents. It would have been cordial and brief and unmooring for me. Growing up I had been encouraged to see myself as the oddity in the corner, embarrassingly sensitive, in need of polishing up and toughening up in equal doses. When they'd call me at school, I suspected they were probing me for signs of overall improvement—a nice girlfriend, an exercise regime—basically any sign that my preppy college was having a curative effect, that their investment in me was panning out in spite of my historically uneven performance, that the bookish boy was being sculpted into a man. Would I have told them that my best friend was a scholarship student from Lowell? Twenty miles, twenty light-years, away from our wealthy suburb of Boston?

"I have restless leg syndrome," I said to Jeremy. "But the thing is, it's everywhere. It's migrated into my brain."

"Sounds serious."

"It is. I need to drive it out. You want to come with me? Ride shotgun somewhere?"

He mulled it over a moment, his caveman features hardening in contemplation, then said sure, why not, and sailed into first place.

"Bring your bowl," he said.

We pulled on our heavy coats and headed downstairs. The building was named Hillside, or maybe it only looked out on a hillside, at the bottom of which a parking lot had been cleared out of the pines. I unlocked my car from a distance that we rushed to put behind us. In the sharp northern air, the noise of the parties echoed, the light from their windows turning us into shadows.

"Why did we go outside," I said.

"Does your car have butt warmers?" Jeremy asked.

It did. The car, a Toyota SUV with a plummeting fuel economy, had belonged to my older sister. As we got inside and waited to warm up, he began to pack a bowl, and offered the driver first hit.

"All you," I said. "I'll keep an eye out for the brainiacs on the campus police squad."

He liked that one. I tried not to show him how much I enjoyed making him laugh.

"Just don't stench up my car," I added.

"Watch it," he said.

The flame clung to the crushed leaves when he inhaled. As it caught, he looked at me and flashed a thumbs-up. He liked to perform niceties that were genuine. I think he wanted you to know that he was having fun, wanted sweetly to assure you that you were good company.

"Come on, Mikey," he said, and I can see him there, dimly: heavy beard, powerful neck, eyes twinkling and direct. "Cops aren't coming for us tonight."

He was right. As I inhaled, I felt a familiar change taking hold. A kind of rising into a question without any need of an answer. We blew smoke through my cracked windows, watched it drift into the night.

"So where are we going?"

"Canada seems all right."

"Canada," he said, sounding the word out on his lips. "Can-a-duh, Can-a-duh . . ."

"How about we head north," I said, turning the key in the ignition.

Maybe I thought there were degrees of driving under the influence, and that the influence I was under was mild. The roads were icy; it had snowed the day before; my license was less than two years old. I seem to see myself gripping the steering wheel, maintaining some moderate speed. The road keeps unspooling into my headlights.

I remember guardrails, a half-moon, almost no one on the roads. Every once in a while, we'd overtake some little old station wagon or a soft drinks trunk, barreling up to New Brunswick. If we could see anything of that dark, thinly populated countryside, it was white fields, flatness, a few sparse roots struggling up out of the snow. Our college was in the central part of the state, and when kids would go skiing at the mountain resorts, they'd drive an hour or so west. But we were heading north.

We were listening to Jeremy's iPod. I can hear him talking about the Dead.

"I mean Phil Lesh, Bob Weir, these guys are in their *seventies*," he said over the sounds of dueling guitars. "Seeing them play 'U.S. Blues' on the Fourth of July, when I was on shrooms—and like you know me, I'm not

someone, like I don't really get patriotic? But I honestly felt like, holy fuck, *now* I can see it."

His enthusiasm for jam bands was so pure and unabashed, I could almost convince myself that I enjoyed listening to them, too. If I thought they made garbage, I kept this opinion firmly to myself, so much did I appreciate his celebratory nature, no matter its particular object. He was gung-ho about flight simulators, the NHL, Wheaten terriers, Dublin. Once he got going on one of these, you didn't want him to stop, it became a minor event, an effusion whose comedy was not lost on him.

"It's just a solid group of guys," I can hear him saying, a little further up 95. "Just a really excellent team. Bergeron, I mean, you worry about him, but—"

"Why, what happened to him?"

"He's out," Jeremy said gravely. "Another concussion. But it wasn't as bad as last year's! That one I saw live on TV. That thing was *brutal*. Gave me the chills, honestly . . ."

I asked him if he'd ever played hockey.

"Me? Nah. I can't really skate. Though I do enjoy ice skating with my little cousins. What about you?"

"I was with the Flyers organization for a little while."

"You were an enforcer."

"I fought the coach."

"You fucked him up."

"I could fuck you up, I think," I said.

"You could for sure fuck me up," Jeremy said. "You could fuck up this whole town."

"What even is this town."

"Skowhegan?" Jeremy said.

"Skowhegan. Who lives here?"

Jeremy fell silent a moment. Then he mimicked me: "*I fought the coach*."

"I don't even know how to skate," I said.

"I could teach you."

We'd met during orientation on a backpacking trip through Acadia National Park. I'd had no experience hiking, let alone backpacking, and had signed up for that particular orientation in order to get as far away as possible from the unathletic boy that I had been. When I twisted my

ankle scrambling up a rock, Jeremy was the only freshman to stay behind with me. He snuck me a joint at the medic's office, where we talked about movies—we both loved Almodóvar—and about the orientation so far, and then gently, very gently, we began to poke fun at the other kids on our trip. Like that one guy, Trevor, whose lie in the game Two Truths and a Lie was that his dad was a senator, when in fact his dad was just *friends* with John Kerry. And that one girl, Amanda, who had already Facebook friended everyone in our grade and had invited all of us for drinks at her lake house on Winnipesaukee. And Nathan—muttering, knife-wielding Nathan—I mean Jesus, what could you say? But then Jeremy and I were both careful to qualify ourselves, and even more than the snark, or the nerding out about film directors, I think this is what bonded us.

"I mean, I could be dead wrong," Jeremy would say.

"He seems really sweet," I'd say. "I'm sure he's just nervous."

We talked that day for hours. And when after arriving back at school, I bought him a pack of expensive beer as a thank you, and offered up the use of my fake ID, I think he was quietly touched.

"Oh, fuck off," he'd said, blushing.

He liked that I was quick-witted and a little clueless, and I found his jockey earnestness endearing. We shared a dumb, sweet sense of humor; a lot of non-sequiturs; a lot of imagined vomiting in civilized places. I didn't appreciate just how well we got along, though, until school started up, at which point I came to know how thoroughly my college reproduced the feeling of my household. There was a positivity to my classmates that felt aggressive and practiced, and I knew this because I had practiced it. *Suck it up and deal* was the saying in our house. *Work hard play hard* was the school's unofficial motto. Here, as there, commercial values seemed to be the only respectable values, and respectability was the laundry that kept the money clean, kept us from seeing the grease that covered the brand new poli sci building, bankrolled and named after one of Wall Street's most prominent CEOs, an alumnus—later disgraced—who every January would dangle the possibility of internships at his bank to the packed house gathered at the school chapel. And why shouldn't he? Econ was by far the most popular major: everyone seemed to be competing for some kind of prize. "Diversity" was a word whose meaning depreciated every time it was used, its final value a penny stock, a token. It was an aromatic, brisk, cutthroat

environment, just like home, and just like at home I wondered what on earth I was doing there, with my movie love and my daydreaming, my skinniness and hormonal acne. It turned out that Jeremy felt as out of place as I did, if for different reasons. He was one of the few students with a work-study job, scrubbing dishes in the kitchen, a condition of his scholarship.

"It's like the kids here know something about me," he said, late one night, as we ate dinner in the empty dining hall. "Something sad and a little embarrassing. They see it when they talk to me. But they think it's polite not to say."

"They don't know shit," I told him, and maybe he was reassured. But then I wondered if I really did know something about Jeremy. And if I did, could it be unlearned?

My tires clasped the road unsteadily. The loose change in the central divider was shaking. Maybe if I paid no attention to the car, it would regain its grip on things.

"Did I tell you, I finally got called on in Deneoux's class," I said, to say something, to ignore the ice.

"How'd it go?" he said, hanging onto the handle.

"Surprisingly OK. He had, like, follow-up questions."

"See! I was right, you should talk."

"I want to be as well-spoken as him," I said, relieved to feel the road flattening out. "Does that sound dumb? I'll read his new book and think like what is the mind that produces this?"

"He has a book?"

"Remember when we saw him cycling?" I said. "I saw him again last week, gunning it. That dude is ripped."

"He's not that big," Jeremy said. "Not like these two guys I see at the gym who I'm pretty sure are on roids."

I asked him what they looked like, imagining not so much human beings as the antitheses of me.

"They're not students," he said. "I think they're assistant coaches on the football team. One of them asked me to spot him on the bench."

I experienced a rush of something I took to be envy.

"Do people ask you that a lot?"

"Come with me sometime," he said, looking at me. "See for yourself."

"OK. But you have to be patient with me."

"I can be patient," he said.

We came, I remember, to a silence. In the silence I sensed him thinking. His mind like a breath withheld.

Then the windshield fogged up and I was fiddling with buttons. We watched the blades scratch and then sweep, steam rising out of vents. In stages the night returned with something like clarity.

"I feel like stretching my legs," I said at last. He didn't say anything and then he said that that was cool.

We found ourselves parking at a rest stop, where it was decided we'd gas up, get some grub. When I slid back into the car after filling up the tank, he was rifling through his backpack, looking for his weed.

"If you won't let me pay for gas, at least let me smoke you up," he said. "I feel bad. It's been your shit all night. Plus you got me like three times yesterday."

"Did I?" I said, pretending I'd forgotten. My strategy for my discomfort over the wealth gap between us was to pay for everything. This didn't seem to lessen the discomfort. "It's coming back to me," I said. "You think I have a drug problem?"

"Naw," Jeremy said, packing the bowl, not seeming to get the joke. It occurred to me then that he might actually know people with "drug problems". Would I have asked him? Something along the lines of, *hey, so did you know a lot of addicts, growing up where you did?* I would have invested this question with as much sobriety and respect as I could, fascinated by his poverty like I might be fascinated by someone's tour in Fallujah: a "harrowing" experience, brave and unnecessary, behind him now, thank God. If I asked such a stupid and offensive question, would I have had any capacity for his answer? If I remember him saying almost nothing about the first eighteen years of life, is it because he was tight-lipped, or because I was thickheaded?

"Can't see anything out of this window," Jeremy said, trying to look through the fogged up glass.

What do I remember about him. I know his oldest friend was named Butchie and that his dog was named Ritz. I know Jeremy had just the one sibling, an older brother named Rory, who was severely mentally handicapped and was living in a group home. Which was a really amazing place, Jeremy was quick to say, but also crazy expensive. I know he had loans on

top of his scholarship, and that his parents—a nurse? a custodian?—also had loans out for him, and maybe a second mortgage, but that's only a guess. He didn't pay much attention to his clothes (could he have afforded to pay more?): usually just plaid shirts, jeans, moccasins. I think he liked the moccasins. I think he looked with skepticism and some contempt at the oxford shirts, the pastel colors that surrounded us at school. I was attempting those clothes, though they never seemed to fit me, and I often wore hoodies over my button-ups, button-ups over T-shirts, as if to pass myself off as someone bigger, manlier, more like Jeremy.

Those layers came in handy in Maine. Getting out of the car, immediately we were hit with the realities of January.

"Fuck me," he said.

"Jesus Christ," I said.

We braved our way toward the steps of the rest stop, old snow blowing across our faces, wind spazzing out from every direction. Jeremy wrenched open the door.

A little shuttered gift shop, Popeyes, Burger King, bathrooms. There was still an Xmas tree presiding at the center of the room, empty boxes strewn around it, empty tables. The only other customers were a middle-aged couple eating fried chicken. They studied us as we came blowing in. I became convinced that the husband doubted my masculine credentials and that the wife doubted my sobriety and maybe also my virility and I told Jeremy I'd meet him at a table, I had to go to the men's room.

By the time I came back, they were gone. There was someone in line behind Jeremy at the BK, a guy around our age. He glanced at me as I got in line. Jeremy caught sight of me and mouthed something.

"What?"

"I'm gonna get a table," he said, blushing.

When the time came for me to order, I delivered my words like they were my last. The woman working at the register stared at me.

"What do you mean, two 'regular burgers'?" she said.

I remember she had an ankh tattooed on her wrist. Years later I would learn the word "ankh."

"Just—plain," I heard myself say. "Just nothing else on them. No cheese."

"Ketchup, mustard?"

"Of course. They're both for me!" I said, then laughed at this, and then

immediately retracted the laugh when she didn't join me in it. I thanked her and paid and awaited my execution.

"What were you laughing about?" Jeremy asked me, as soon as I joined him at the table.

I told him what I'd said. He laughed.

"Mikey's fucked up," he said.

"Mikey's fucked up," I said.

"Dude, *I'm* fucked up." He rubbed his eyes. "You mind if we eat in the car?"

"You didn't order anything to eat."

"Still," he said.

"Let's stay." I wanted to see if through determination I could force myself to act naturally. I sat up and expanded my chest and put my elbows on the table and ate my burgers with what I thought was conviction, even brio. I considered myself from the cashier's station, from the other boy's table, from behind the bars of the gift shop, and imagined myself in the hands of some invisible director, an auteur who looked uncannily like my father. He was raising my shoulders, cutting my dialogue, trying to position me in the strongest possible light. I counted at least three cameras stationed on the walls, three hooded little orbs, and as I talked with Jeremy, as I pretended to listen, I tried to behave as if it were an inevitability that I myself would be reviewing the footage later, along with my father, who like any supreme artist was sure to be unsatisfied.

But then Jeremy would say something I wouldn't expect. And then I would say something before I could take it back. Soon it was the game of trying not to laugh, trying to make the other laugh, and we were losing, we weren't even trying. I remember us getting stuck on the name Phil for some reason. A pregnant pause, then:

"Phil?"

"Weigh in, Phil?"

And on and on like this. Laughing, sharing fries. Riffing, improvising, or whatever it is you call it when you lose the will to perform, or at least forget for a little while that you are performing, the cameras probably inescapable, the script long memorized, untold numbers of crew people making any moment possible. But even still, these moments, unproduced, spontaneous, what gets cut.

It was snowing when we left the rest stop. Snow fell against the halides as we walked our way toward the car, but I don't think we'd have commented on it, it was nearly our second semester in Maine. In the car I turned on the butt warmers, and Jeremy found his weed. He began to pack another bowl.

We were miles and miles up the highway. Jeremy toked up as I turned on the radio. I seem to remember country western, songs of lost love. The wipers swept back and forth, back and forth against the snow, and when he handed me the bowl, I thanked him.

"For what?" he said, smiling.

I took in the pipe and sucked it and felt the question rising, the one without an answer. I imagined us fishtailing, spinning out here on the highway. I imagined up the road there'd come some big jump, a yellow ramp from our video game, red zigzags painted on it. We would take it through the waterfall that concealed the hidden cave. A shortcut to paradise, through paradise, the beach.

Jeremy asked me if I was good to drive.

"I'm good," I told him.

"Mikey's good," he said.

A sidelong glance, his head against his window.

But soon the snow became truly heavy, whirling toward us in frenzied gusts, my wipers struggling to manage it. I looked at Jeremy, he looked at me. We took the first exit we could find, searching for somewhere to park. I could see no further than a few inches up the road. Blindly I pulled into the lot of a closed church, or maybe it was a closed liquor store.

There we sat and watched the snow. At some point the blades became absurd. I turned off everything but the ignition. And then I turned that off too.

Jeremy looked at me.

I leaned over and I kissed him. He took my face in his hands. I felt myself growing hard.

When he took his cock out, I remember thinking that it was one of the most beautiful things that I had ever seen. I did not hesitate. It tasted like absolutely nothing, and I realized I was relieved. I must have been afraid that it would taste terrible, I must have been thinking about it. He was making sounds, his hand was in my hair, I didn't want his hand in my hair, I kept expecting him to come. When he didn't, I was annoyed. I thought

thank God no one is seeing this, the windows are whited out. He put his hand around me and then he put his lips around me and soon I began to feel the limits of the car, the seat cushions groaning under us, the contortions to reach each other. He hadn't been sucking long before I heard myself ask if he wanted to climb in back.

It took him a moment to tear himself away. His hand stayed wrapped around me.

"We could find a hotel," he said.

I made a point of glancing behind us, of looking at the back of the car. I tried to ignore the pleasure of his grip, its possessiveness, its certainty.

"OK," I said.

Then we were searching on our phones, our pants were back on, his hand was on my leg, we didn't want to get cold. Staring absentmindedly at my phone, I wondered if a hotel meant that I was now an adult. And then, as if with scissors, I cut that line of thought. I could not think of meanings, implications.

We found a hotel listed just up the road.

Driving there, arriving there. The night took on a motor and I think I wanted to be overrun. I see us walking toward the hotel entryway. A feeling of being swept in. The word "phagocytosis" bubbles up for me from AP Biology. Sliding doors miraculously open. I have no sense of what time it is. I'm not sure if we should feel lucky.

Inside. There's a long hall and at the end of it stands a man at reception. He's staring intently at the computer. Red Christmas lights all along the wall. He asks me the standard questions and types in my answers. Jeremy is hovering next to me. Or is he sitting on a bench. I fill out the forms, I pay for the room, the keycard is handed over. I look at Jeremy, he's shaking his head, smiling, saying I shouldn't have to pay for everything, and together we walk down another hall. The man at reception is named Murray, or we pass by a room where people are watching reruns of *Maury*. We're in our room before I know we're in our room.

It's reddish and beige and drab in forgettable ways. It's a smoking room, but both of us comment on how heavy the smoke smell is. When I speak, my voice sounds high and fragile, and when he kisses me, I find myself wishing he would destroy it. But soon our clothes are coming off. I experience the sensation of seeing him anew, of meeting him again. His eyes appear

closer together, a little bluer, more vivid. His nose looks a little broken, his shoulders seem enormous. His nipples remind me of udders, though not in an unpleasant way. Naked, his whole person seems to point toward his penis, even the mole on his inner thigh. I'm astounded by this, astounded that I ever thought I knew him before seeing him like this.

Then I'm naked too. But before he could take in a complete image of my nakedness—before I was subjected to that—I was on my knees, I was pulling him toward me.

"Whoa whoa," he was saying, "what's the rush?"

But soon it didn't matter, I was sucking, he was groaning, his chin straining upward, torso splayed on one of the twin beds, his legs spread wide to admit me on the floor. If the radiator was humming, if the people through the wall had the TV on high, I didn't hear a thing, I had left the room. I was rubbing him while sucking him, I was laving his tip with my tongue. His muscles tensed, a bated breath, his hand gripping mine—and then I felt his self-control, I felt him coming back. I sucked him with more fervor. I thought of the word "fountain."

"Fuck," he said, and it sounded like a plea. "Fuck."

I envisioned myself as some kind of small and determined animal. Now I was kissing the cock, it was red and shining with spit. He began, I remember, to make a sound whose beauty was its guilelessness, its passage through the absurd, funny one way and then funny another way, before becoming something unspeakably tender. And when it ended I yearned for it. I wanted to make him make it again. But I had already begun to lose my memory of it, its quality, its tenor. That night I began this habit of grasping at straws.

I don't know how long I sucked him. I remember other tensing ups, other moments of breathlessness and return. I began to get frustrated, my jaw was aching. Why hadn't he come. I was giving him everything. All of this was dependent on his coming, I could not think beyond that event. My life as far as I was concerned was over beyond that event, this room would collapse, when he came I would die, there would be no afterlife.

Finally I drew away from him, said something about needing a break.

I rose up unsteadily, felt the rugburn on my knees, sank down on the other twin bed. I reached for my boxers. Pulled on my shirt. I could have slept then.

"Can I fuck you?"

I glanced at him sharply and just as sharply looked away. I wondered, doubtfully, if he'd ask again. Of course he asked again. I heard him say it, can I fuck you? Except this time, he added my name at the end: Mike. Can I fuck you, Mike.

I remember staring at the blacked-out television. I think that I laughed.

In fact I know that I laughed, I had broken into laughter, I was shaking my head.

"Oh Jesus," I said. "Oh fuck . . ."

"What's so funny?" he asked. I could hear him trying to keep the uncertainty out of his voice.

"Sorry," I said. "Sorry. I think it's the weed."

Maybe it was the weed. Everything began to feel ridiculous to me. To find myself nude on a twin bed in a Best Western in Bumblefuck, Maine. Asked to be sodomized by the only friend I'd managed to make at college. What a scene! No girlfriends, no girls in our lives at all. I thought of an ouroboros of loneliness, I thought of two cannibals eyeing each other in the snow, I thought of other metaphors. My laugh is my father's laugh.

"Don't be mean," Jeremy said, not quite reproachful, sounding like he was willing to go along with the joke on himself, if only I would tell him what that joke was. He was sitting up, facing me from his bed, his bare legs close together, his chest pale and glittering with hair.

"Don't you want to have sex?"

"No," I said.

"Oh."

Thinking of how this must look, I began to look at him again and sat up.

"I mean," I said, suddenly mortified, "I mean, I would keep blowing you. But I don't—"

"OK," he said.

I paused.

"So—should I keep doing that?"

"Sure," he said. Then, "No. I don't know."

We were silent awhile. He had been facing me before, but no longer, we were marooned on our separate beds. I had the sense in me of a border against which all trespass was useless. I felt I ought to apologize for it.

"Sorry," I said. "Sorry. I think I'm really high."

He suggested I drink some water.

"The thing is," I said, "we don't even have lube. We don't even have condoms."

I began to sound out reservations, safety concerns. I thought I was persuading him, but he interrupted me and said, "Do *you* want to fuck *me*?"

I paused.

"I don't care if it hurts," he said, his face in the lamplight. "I just want to be with you."

I stared at him, helplessly. I heard the openness of his suggestion. I felt my curiosity opening. To be desired in his arms, and I desired his arms—to be wrapped in him, plugged by him, filled in with Jeremy. What would it be like. Would it be real. Would I be real. Would I be a stain.

My head was in my hands.

"Whoa," I heard him say, and there was a lightness, almost a humor in his voice, I think he began to get hard again. "What's wrong?"

Maybe I laughed in the face of this question. I'm sure I was unable to cry. He began trying to draw me out, consoling me while questioning me, sitting beside me on my bed.

"There's no pressure," I heard him saying.

"There's no rush."

I looked up at him, uncomprehendingly.

"What do you mean, 'rush'?"

He sucked on his bottom lip, he drew a breath, then explained that we didn't have to do anything tonight. That we could take it slow if we wanted.

I envisioned a black liquid trickling down the walls. I saw my professor on the bike pedaling away from me, fast.

"No," I said. "No. I'm sorry. No."

I was looking at the alarm clock.

"We're friends," I said. "Only friends. We're just fucked up tonight."

At some point he got up and walked away and sat down on the floor, with his back to the television.

I could hear a truck going by at fifty miles an hour. I began to chew the insides of my mouth.

"I know we're friends," he said. "And I know we're more than that."

If I kept shaking my head, maybe I could nullify his voice.

"For months we've been like a couple," he said, and I realized there was

no denying his soft note of outrage, of disbelief. "We spend all our time together. We do everything together."

"It's only cause we're freshmen," I said.

"Come on."

"We don't know anybody."

"That's not true. We know a lot of people."

When I disagreed, he began to rattle off names. I resisted each one. Those people didn't actually like me, they thought I was a joke. Some skinny little virgin with absolutely nothing going for him. The tone in my voice I've since recognized in fundamentalists and Olympians.

"Why else are we alone tonight if not to be with each other?" Jeremy said. "Like we *could* have gone to Jesse's thing. Or we could have gone to that party on your floor."

I made the point that no one had invited us to that party.

"Well who gives a shit!" he said. "Sometimes, Mike, I think you look for the worst in everything."

"That's not true," I said. The truth was, I had been raised to believe that if I didn't find the worst in everything, I would not become the best.

"Sorry I don't like guys," I said in a way I hoped would make clear that I was not at all sorry. "I like girls. I always have."

"So why don't you have a girlfriend?"

I told him to stop being such an asshole.

"No, you're not listening to me," he said. "I'm saying, why don't you have one when you *could* have had one?"

I denied ever having that possibility.

"That girl Megan you stopped seeing, that girl Allie you never called," he said. "Lisa wanted you to meet her whole family on parents' weekend."

"Well why *should* I meet her family?" I said, angry that he was bringing up Lisa. "We hooked up twice! Then she went and got a boyfriend, remember? Some bro on the soccer team."

"Because *you* stopped texting her back," Jeremy said calmly. "You never asked yourself why?"

"I think you've gotten way, way too invested in my personal life, dude," I said, clutching my biceps, nails digging into my skin.

I wanted to hit him. I wanted to punch away his question. Because if the story of those girls wasn't a story of their rejection of me, then immediately

it took the form a softer, less bitter narrative, the story of a kind of marriage, a quiet, playful bond, where I was the spouse whose eye wandered, but never very far. We weren't just inseparable in this version: we were wedded, spoken for. Anything else was just a fling. The thought terrified me.

"I've turned down other guys," he said, his voice shaking. "For you, I turned them down."

I looked at him. It was obvious that he was telling the truth, and in the obviousness of this, in the directness of his gaze, I felt a sudden vertigo, the feeling of my understanding of him falling away, plunging.

The first time we met, he told me his summer had begun with a construction job, building a Walmart, and had ended with his being a cashier in that same Walmart. Now I thought I saw another summer hidden within that summer before college, something wafting through the boredom of the aisles, some teasing familiarity with a coworker, a flirtation on the hood of a car, a boy in whose likeness I was shadowed. Jeremy looked at me carefully, then listed the names of his potential lovers at school, guys in our year but also a series of upperclassmen, some of them very popular. I could see him gauging my reaction as he listed the names, leading them into the room with us like show dogs. If I felt jealousy, if I wanted them all dead, I did my best not to show it.

"If you want to be with guys, you should be with guys," I heard myself say. "I don't care one way or the other."

"Well *I* care," he said. "And I think that you do, too."

He was still naked. His cock had withdrawn into itself. His balls seemed to hang heavily, and I felt a sudden desire to cradle them in my hands. I felt the possibility—I could be his boy pinned to the car, trapped by his arms. His release at the end of the day. The outlet for his frustrations. The possibility of a deeper laughter, together. Of living, bathing, in the source of that laughter.

"I love you," I can hear him saying. "I love you, we're in college. I love you, and in college, you can do whatever you want."

There was so much hope in his voice. We had after all just voted in our first election, and had won.

"I know we're in college," I said.

I thought of the SAT tutors I'd had. I thought of the application essay

my parents had paid someone to help me write, the one on Nietzsche. They had not spent all this money on their son for him to become a faggot.

Jeremy got up and began to pace around the room. I followed him with my eyes, the smooth curve of his back, the muscles parted around his spine. He swung his large arms, clapped his hands gently. He sat down at the chair at the little desk, tugged the cord on the lamp. When I looked away, I could feel him staring at me. I looked back at him and he was staring absentmindedly at the floor.

I went into the bathroom and squirted out some of the hotel's toothpaste, rubbed it on my teeth. I spat into the sink and washed my face, and when I came out, he was packing another bowl at the desk.

I zipped up my hoodie. I spread out the blanket and got into bed wearing everything but my shoes. When he cracked the window, I felt the night air blowing in. I lay there on my back for I don't know how long. He turned on the TV, he turned it off. He got into his bed, then got up a few times. For a while he sat writing something on the little notepad at the desk. Around three in the morning he got up to use the bathroom. From my pillow I watched the fringe of light under the door.

I heard a flush. Then he was already back in bed.

"Everyone experiments in college." That night, in my cold clothes, I huddled to these words. My body was bent around them. If they gave me no comfort, was there a chance, I wondered, that they'd feel more natural tomorrow? I had a sense they might be indispensable. At least for a little while. I was still imagining that after enough time had passed—maybe a couple days, or a week—Jeremy would want to get dinner with me, study with me, get back to the laughing and joking around. And maybe we'd write this whole night off as one bad hypothesis, because everybody experiments in college, and some experiments should never be attempted, some end in disaster. What a good phrase it was: Everyone experiments in college. What a helpful phrase. Words built to last, intended to see you not just through four years of college, but into a career, into children, over the span of a lifetime. Long enough, I told myself, as I shivered my way to sleep, for me to make myself, remake myself, into someone unrecognizable.

CINDERELLA

STEPHANIE BURT

The trans story is the heroine has to be trans
because nobody else in the capital shares
her size. The prince must roam from house to house,
from mansion to cottage to townhome, trying to find
the one girl who came to the winter solstice ball
in glass slippers (they must have hurt like hell
by the end of the night, even rightly sized) with heels
at least 1 1/2″ high, and (more important)
in ladies' 13 1/2. But the longer
trans story is the prince was already
kissing and sharing secrets with his footman:
raised as a boy, the prince's favorite footman
was really a girl named Cindy, but only the prince
knew her chosen name. They could never marry:
the kingdom wouldn't accept it. So he told
her. And he wouldn't want anyone else. So when
the king insisted he choose, at that ball, a bride,
the prince arranged for Cindy to show up, splendid
in tiara and heels, all starry like Andromeda
viewed from a moonless mountaintop. When
(the plan went) the king asked the prince the next day
"Who was that girl you spent the night with?" he'd tell
the king to scour the town for Cindy,
the one who got away. Except that Cindy

didn't get away: instead she arranged—
of course, of course, unbeknownst to him—
to pop out from a family friend's garage,
then pop the question. And the prince said yes,
I've changed my mind; we're not going to hide any more.
That's the version we give the cis, and it's lovely, but
the truth is almost nobody gets it right:
the trans story is that the prince herself
is the trans girl in the story, and like so
many of us, she spent day after day—
before the party, after the party, maybe
instead of attending the party—crossing the town,
ringing doorbells, trawling message boards, scouring yard sales
and barging into shopfronts right before closing
to talk to the tired clerks, never giving up
her search for the one, the terrific, the just-right shoe.

WHO ARE YOU

STEPHANIE BURT

Possibly nobody over ten ever considered
it the Who's best song; nevertheless,
the pulse and reverse and lusty shout, followed
repeatedly by both singers' croon, or coo—*come on*
and tell me, who are you—
is what starts pounding in my head,
not the original, confident radio edit
but the garbled, discordant boom
and amplified off-key scratchy throats in the all-
-too-live version I heard in 1988,
in the rain, in the stadium where I almost held hands
with Jon, who got As in math
and Ds in everything else,
who knew he would be just fine (he would not be fine),
and so chose (we thought that he chose; it was not a choice)
to spend the last year of his teens seducing
teens who could not wait to be seduced,
conducting experiments in skin-to-skin
contact, on bleachers in summer, on shallow steps
of backyard swimming pools, in his parents' guest
bed, or else their lumpy second-best bed,
between stiff king-sized sheets, its mother-of-pearl
headrest and clamshell lip like a second Birth
of Venus—no, a Venus in reverse,

all four of us scrambling out of our separate bodies
into imaginary foam,
deliberately uncertain who held or stroked
the calves or thighs belonging to who or whom,
and, also, vodka shots. His proofs
and lemmas, axioms and definitions
for what we would learn to call, gingerly, liberation,
derived from no fixed function or foundation
(like adding 1 or 2 to 17)
but from those wandering prophets, the Grateful Dead,
to whose service he also brought me. There were drums,
in space and then down to Earth, and then the open-
ended, almost tune-
free passage through a denim crowd,
their rainbow cottons dimmed
in part by the foggy day, in part by the haze
whose honey and burnt lime scent
I learned to recognize. The keyboard hook
in their incongruously compact late hit "Touch of Grey"
was like a hard landing, like gravity returning,
a can of cold soda applied to my neck and ears.
It all comes back this afternoon,
listening not to the Dead or the Who
(half of whom are now dead) but to Laura Veirs's
enticing and now literally
maternal alto, finding her way
along the gentle rise that underscores
the words in the chorus to "Mountains of the Moon."

WHEN YOU ARE NINE

DORSEY CRAFT

You are the spines inside a strawberry, stuffed full of white bread after school. You know the code to the alarm system. It is the time of pets: the frill-backed pigeons with their froth of pepper feathers, the dumb aquarium, the wayward mutt that makes your lab spill litters under the porch. The oily rooster, its comb like an earlobe, the awkward ferocity when it spurs you and your sister collecting eggs. A girl refuses to eat them when your father serves them before church and you dig your nails into the heels of your palms like you do in the truck bed, getting dropped off at the dove stands. The shells are long and thin, the gun so light it barely brushes your shoulder. The men call your name across the field, whistle and holler when you cut one down. You count your steps over the furrows when you pick up the bird, finger its head inside the bag on your hip. Boys your age shoot the limit, lean against four-wheelers. You wish Hunter F. would give you a ride without your dad making him. Hunter S. pretends he doesn't know who you are even though your mothers have been slathering sunscreen on you and feeding you Vienna sausages since you were three, your dark baby backs next to each other on the sand. Late afternoon, your father brings you a Cherry Coke and lies down in the field with his head against your shins. He shows you how to scan the tree line, how to move your head slow so the ponytail doesn't flick and shine. When you get home, the rooster is green and purple, smashed into quarters through the fence, a bright mangle with its spurs tipped up to the sky.

AREN'T I A *TRAVESTI* TOO?[1]

DENILSON LOPES

For Marcelo Secron Bessa

> *We remain unknown to ourselves,*
> *we seekers after knowledge,*
> *even to ourselves: and with good reason.*
> *We have never sought after ourselves*
> *—so how should we one day find ourselves?*
> *It has rightly been said that: "Where your treasure is,*
> *there will your heart be also."*
> FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE[2]

There was a time, during the latter part of the '90s, when the *travesti* reached a privileged moment of visibility in pop culture.[i] Coming from the ghettos and the underground, the *travesti*, through their drag queen version,[ii] was incorporated into the constantly growing clubber culture, arriving to fashion shows around the world, to MTV and Hollywood, not to mention television variety programs, talk shows, and more or less serious journalistic news series in particular—creating media personalities. In Brazil, it was the

1. Originally published as Denilson Lopes, "E eu não sou um travesti também?," in *O homem que amava rapazes e outros ensaios* (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, 2002), 67–88. Translated by Raquel Parrine, Lauren Darnell, and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes. All footnotes are by the translators.

2. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

same. Joining the long tradition of Brazilian carnival *travestimento*, Roberta Close became a sexual symbol and the television presence of *travestis* was no longer a theme exclusive to police programs or exotic attraction. It must not be forgotten that it was through the *travesti*—perhaps due to being the most visible facet of a gay subculture, though not constrained by it—that many of the issues of homosexuality entered the social sciences, particularly anthropology, ranging from the classical studies of Harold Garfinkel and Esther Newton on drag to recent works on the Brazilian *travesti*. Now that drag style seems to return and stabilize almost as a cliché, leaving fad aside, it's time to rethink the *travesti* not as a social group to be studied and observed, nor as a metaphor of transitive possibilities in contemporary sexuality, a position enshrined by North American gay and lesbian studies as a result of the controversy caused by the release of Jennie Livingston's film *Paris Is Burning* (1990), a moving documentary about drag balls in Harlem, New York, where gay Latino and Black men vogued. The *travesti* isn't simply an intellectual construction that places artifice as a central category in our society of images, in which performative identities are constructed, well in advance of actual debates about body and technology. It is not a question of speaking about the Other, stigmatized and/or spectacularized, but rather speaking about *travestimento*—as something that penetrates our desires and emotions, our uncertainties, and our place in the world. As such, here—in this mixture of testimony, autobiographical critique, and disidentificatory performance, incorporating dangerous or contradictory elements of an identity (Muñoz 1999, 11–12), constructed by fragments of texts and images—here a *travesti* speaks.

1

I was always fascinated by and not attracted to *travestis*—to the same degree I was attracted to strong men without being fascinated by them—although I have never worn dresses, high heels, or makeup, nor do I have mannerisms or affectations when I speak. It doesn't matter. I always felt that, if I had a soul, it would be *travesti*. Don't ask me why or how. I only sense that each part of me passes through genders and desires that I am less and less able to identify. Now that my distressing adolescence and subsequent need for homosexual affirmation become progressively distant, it is the *travesti* in

me and their game of masks that constitute me and make me what I am. It's good to stop here, or not? Too confessional? To be a *travesti* takes me away from adolescent melancholy, it throws me into the theater of joy, into a reality affirming joy, in all of its nuances and fantasies, it makes me present. Now that I am 30 years old, I seem to reconquer the desire of discovery. Please, Coco Peru,[3] guide me through this path that I begin to forge. So many stories left to live. In life and in text, transimages, transwriting, transdiary.[iii]

2

The possibilities of the game that enliven subjectivity through the use of masks reside in an understanding of the image-oriented nature of current society. The mask is not a disguise of an existential void, rather a strategy for coexisting in a society where the primacy is one of velocity. There is a permanent clash, represented especially by the protagonist of Silviano Santiago's *Stella Manhattan*, between memory and gaze, narcissism and tribalism. Its centering in intimate, personal life is configured as a complex strategy and difficult to be maintained against the changes of the exterior world. Stella Manhattan, a modest Brazilian consular officer in New York, is a present-day Madame Bovary, divided between reality and fantasy. Far from Brazil, exiled by her parents after the discovery of her homosexuality, Stella longs for the beach, the sun of Rio de Janeiro, and Ricky, in whom she sees a reincarnated James Dean, the possibility of great passion, and not just a mere hustler.[4] *Stella Manhattan* is a novel of shattered illusions, of frustrated formation, or perhaps of a modern impossibility to adequately express the ephemeral and lasting in personal relationships. Stella, at the end, can say "Now I am a star." Even if she had died in an American prison, raped by the prisoners (one of the versions of the ending), what is more beautiful and terrible than a death atop mud? Or a death in midair like a

3. Miss Coco Peru is the drag persona of American actor, comedian, and drag performer Clinton Leupp.

4. Lopes uses the term *michê* for male hustler. See the important work of Néstor Perlongher, *O negócio do michê: Prostituição viril em São Paulo* (1987), translated into Spanish as *El negocio del deseo: La prostitución masculina en San Pablo*.

star? Stella, in fact, doesn't die; she disappears in the words of the other characters. Her body is scattered. "*Viado não morre, vira purpurina*" (A faggot doesn't die, he turns into glitter) (Laura de Vison).

3

No more built-up resentment, nor silence, nor disappearance. "No more crying games." New games in which roles are exchanged, in which we are open when the unexpected enters our life, that the ridiculous doesn't prevent us from appearing fully dressed[5] in drag in the harshest desert, completely made up, like in the film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, only in order to fulfill a dream, only by a gratuitous act of affirmation. A simple gesture reveals a world.

4

The *travesti* is the aristocrat of the imagination, the achievable aristocrat, elegant in the gutter. In *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, by Manuel Puig, his most resounding success, adapted to the stage and cinema, melodramatic films, generally with a notable feminine character, told by Molina to Valentín, his prison mate, are not only the obverse of the disgusting cell or the minimal space of dreams in times of oppression but also the form of communication that is established among such diverse characters. Molina will ultimately construct himself in enigma through films, a spider woman that "traps men in her web." His search for the feminine is nothing more than a search for androgyny, for ambiguity. Identity as a process.

5

I pursue a theater of desire, breaking expectations, placing more and more the dimension of experience in the critical act. It's time to forget past readings and see what remains of them on the body. Recover the affirmation of spectacle present in the baroque world and set aside theorists such as

5. Lopes uses the term *montado* from *montagem* (production), fully produced or staged, with lots of elaborate makeup and clothing (costume) and hair (wigs).

Debord (1997) and Jameson (1994), who fail to see beyond the image as a last step of commodification and of empty aestheticism that populates narratives without history. It's necessary to recover spectacle as an existential condition and destiny. From the simulacrum return to the theater of the world to free ourselves from boredom and indifference before the excess of images, without falling into nostalgic fascination of authenticity. In the ruins, playing is not just a passive attitude but an affirmation of life.

6

In *Cobra*, Severo Sarduy, as a good heir to the neo-baroque Cuban novel, the fear is not, as it is in the baroque, of a tension between the world and transcendence but between the copy and the original (Chiampi 1994, 19) or, rather, the precariousness of the simulacrum. *Cobra* is a sort of heir to the melancholic prince, "the martyr of exile in a simulating body" (ibid. 19). His dilemma, at first, is particularly crystallized in the size of the feet. "My God . . . why was I born if not to look absolutely divine?" (Sarduy 1981, 11). But the sequence of violence, of remedies, culminate in a poetic metamorphosis: from Cobra's feet, flowers grow (ibid. 37). The victory of poetry over the limitations of nature and habit.

7

My body renews itself, takes off the chains of fears and exposes itself free, strong. Upon each look, it becomes different, attentive of the other's gaze. I make myself a spectacle, in the street, in the classroom, when I write right now. I gently grab my coat. I protect myself. I walk. It's time to take chances, time for the metamorphosis. The movements of labor intensify. I am born with an unknown voice. The song is chained inside the throat. It will start. It is starting.

8

Being superficial, today, is not necessarily equal to banality, to vulgarity, but it reintroduces the ludic aspect of the social relationship. I always keep in mind the voice of the diva Grace Jones, in "Private Life," as a motto and a

challenge: "I'm very superficial / I hate everything official." The chameleonic concern is not just a strategy to maintain the existential and aesthetic singularity from the mass media's ferocious desire for new things, but it is a strategy to revalorize pleasure—from the modernist dandies to the New Romantics, from disco to technopop—or even to bet on the political, ethical, and epistemological possibilities of the becoming and on the surface between the thinkers of difference (see especially Deleuze 1996, 11–38). There is a constant struggle against the institutionalization of the appearance, which, however, never ceases to happen. The melancholy for the loss of the unity of the self coexists with new tribal rites, such as voguing, whose name originated from the famous fashion magazine. In this dance, people mimic poses from models and *stars*, or they want to behave like such, as we are told by one of its supporters, Malcolm McLaren: "I liked the idea of those people trying to look important, trying to be noticed. Being a star for just a moment, on the dance floor . . . When they leave the nightclub, they may be nothing. It was this romantic tragedy that I found fabulous." This style booms globally with Madonna and the song "Vogue": "If the music is pumping it will give you new life / You're a superstar / yes, that's what you are, you know it." The fascination with the night: the desire for orgiastic integration and loneliness in the middle of the crowd. Romantic myth? It's as if the movie stars from the 1930s and 1940s had descended on Earth and sprinkled their flair where there was fantasy. Beyond the dance floor, in the meandering paths of the metropolis, the elegance glows momentarily. They are perceived as beautiful when they are moving. Can sentimentality exist in the crazy world of fashion? I think of Liza Minnelli singing "New York, New York": her arms want to detach themselves from the body; the body wants to get away from itself in an explosion, in a dispersion. I remember Judy Garland, at the end of *The Pirate*, affirming joy: "Be a clown, be a clown, be a clown." I remember Rita Lee[6] singing "I wanna be a *star*," even if she was the one who said she is the black sheep[7] of the family. My body explodes in references and images of shine and of what lies beyond shine, beyond fugacity.

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6. Rita Lee is a very popular singer of MPB (Popular Brazilian Music). She was the lead singer of the legendary band Os Mutantes.

7. This is the title of one of Rita Lee's most famous songs, "Ovelha negra."

9

I just wanted to write something so simple and direct that would make you happy, but the only thing I can think about are texts and images already made. My feelings are songs. My desires, movie scenes. My dreams, literature. I want to unbare myself, but I always find the pose, the affectation, the *écriture*. Life is not enough for me, except when it is theater.

10

I pull up the dress a little bit. Smoothly, I go down the stairs. I am happy, just happy. In the middle of the stairs. I continue to descend the stairs. The right foot is suspended. The right arm gains speed. The head lifts up, proud. It's time.

11

The search for fame, for being a *star*, doesn't represent only a projection of the social imaginary, which is frustrating, in general. Alternatively, this search is a condition in which the appearance, the present being becomes more important than a fixed identity. Such desire affects also the intellectual environment. The reactions to the predominance of the image can be marked by an almost nostalgic resignation: "There is nothing I can do about it. I have to pass through the image. The image is like a social military service. I can't be exempted, I can't be reformed, I can't desert, etc. To know one's own image becomes a passionate grueling quest (one never makes it), which is analogue to the stubbornness of who wants to know if it's right to be jealous" (Roland Barthes). There are still the ones who seek, at any cost, their one minute of glory, not the fifteen minutes of fame anymore. They take the challenge of a mutant personality, which is, in this sense, superficial. "I prefer to remain a mystery. I never speak about where I came from, about who I am. And, in any case, every time they ask me, I say different things. It's not that it's part of my image not to say anything. It's just that I forget what I said yesterday and I have to make it up all over again. Anyway, I don't think I have an image, favorable or unfavorable" (Andy Warhol). I tried the excess. I dreamt of success. My life, little moments. I wanted the

words to give me what I do not have. Today, I only search for words equal to my stature. After searching for the shine, when I get home and I am aware of myself, I ask, "Which mask is this, which makes me company?" I laugh at all of this.

12

Before, I used to write to explain myself. I would gloss over sentiments with ideas and theories. I would hide behind the professor. I would grab the leftovers of readings and build texts. I would create an imposture: the novice intellectual. What remains now is me, before the text. I don't want shield ideas or crutch ideas anymore. Let them die if they aren't alive, if they don't make the world speak. I change clothes. I feel challenged, insecure. I dive into the experience.

13

The old *travesti* doesn't remember things when he gets drunk. In *La duchesse de Langeais*, by Michel Tremblay, a playwright who inserts the speeches and behaviors of common and marginalized people in Quebec's theater, there is no atonement that comes from impurity, from criminality, from humiliation, as in Jean Genet. There is only loneliness, being with your own images. Norma Desmond always watches her own movies in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*. Maybe she wants the illusion of still being a star, maybe she just wants to exist. Growing old in that chair, in a hidden room, Saul, a character from the novel *Onde andará Dulce Veiga?* by Caio Fernando Abreu,[8] is alone with his, with my memories, so passionately obsessed by Dulce Veiga, a synthesis of the MPB[9] divas, to the point of wanting to be her. When is that coming? I know it is coming. I am afraid of it, but it is going to come. The few dead friends. The distant acquaintances. No one needs me anymore. I wanted a less dramatic scene. How wouldn't it be dramatic? Come, death,

8. Caio Fernando Abreu was a gay Brazilian writer who wrote extensively about queerness and created the most notorious, seductive queer characters of Brazilian literature. He died of AIDS in 1996.

9. MPB (Música Popular Brasileira): Popular Brazilian Music.

carry me away like a knight-errant, like Percival in the Indian prairies. Make my pain my last mask, a piercing laughter, that was never heard. To die one thousand times in Venice? The shadows fall. It is only an old man with trembling hands, groping his body. A delicate fruit. The pulp takes time to decompose, to reveal the hard skeleton. The features gain new ambiguities, mountains, vales, rivers. The body's relief gains diversity; it is not an endless flat plain anymore. I could get lost in my own skin. It is what I think today, 1999, when I am 33 years old, in another morning born in a hurry, with so many things to do.

14

The eyes coerce. I grow as if I would fall from myself. The head is a world of ideas. The lips are dry. The arms raise: lightning rod. The words multiply themselves rapidly. My voice erases time. The students are gone. Lost, I walk around the university. There is no stage anymore. Exhausted, I take the car. I can hardly drive. The city hurts. The loneliness is devastating. There is no voice for this helplessness. In the park. Every person I pass by, I wish I could penetrate their eyes, be another, be anybody. Anything that would make me forget, belong. I arrive at home and I write.

15

I have always liked divas and teens. Both would bring me images of happiness—a happiness born from pain, from doubt, from anger, from refusal, or simply from energy. Mystery played by the diva. The empty mystery of the teenager. The arranged pose and the savage look that offers itself, that provokes. One's voice, the other's body. The voice that devours the world devours myself. Body in which I dive, in which I dream. *Got to be there. Chaka Khan, I feel love for you*. How to evoke those desires in which the body becomes music and the image becomes desire? But when I look at the mirror, I don't see a teenager but an adult man, still young, OK, but who doesn't feel young always and likes it. He is a little fat, a little bald, has small glasses, even smaller eyes. People say that, when I had short hair, I looked

like Mário de Andrade.[10] Sometimes, I get tired of writing in the first person. Sometimes, it is all that I can do, incapable of creating characters and of distancing myself from what I feel, from what I live. Writing ends up being my better mirror, the one that I chose.

16

I also wanted to sing. I also wanted to play. I wanted to take home each handsome man, to take them all—all of them are mine, even when they aren't. When that boy came to talk to me, I could only look at his mouth, I wanted to bite it. I could hardly concentrate on what he was saying. I forgot that a female student had made an appointment to talk to me. It looks like it is always that way. The swift fragmentary images occupy a space bigger and bigger. People don't stay. Will my eyes get tired? Will I get tired? The loneliness strikes in every recess. Will writing be my only company, when everything changes pace? What waits for me when everything around me is no more? Why do I think about it? Everything is clichés and idioms. I try to start again, to search for the path between those ruins, but what can I do if every story, every idea hides a banality in the present or in the future?

17

I grab my bag. I leave the house. Quickly, by car. In the hallways, no longer (invaded), taken (aback) by every look. It does not matter any longer, looked at or not, I perform. Happy to be a man, woman, whatever I want, whatever you want. As the sun rises, I become another. Only here, in writing, is there a pause, a moment of suspension. A transformative or drag writing, to speak of the mask in order to speak of oneself. Every truth is an imposture; every affect, an affectation; every gesture, a pose; every moment, a scene; every voice, a song.

18

10. Mário de Andrade was a Brazilian writer from the 1920s, one of the most prominent authors of the movement called Modernismo. His homosexuality is still regarded as a taboo in scholarly works.

1, 2, 3, rolling. The curtains open now. The scene is about to begin. It already started. It is not a monologue. The characters multiply, do not stop coming by. Who will be able to help me when there is no longer anything to say, or reason why to act, nothing to do? Only that white light in front of my face.

19

I remember those Diana Ross and Dionne Warwick compilations I bought when I was 10, 12 years old. It's so long ago that I only remember that back then I wanted to start a record collection, making sure to know better the singers I liked. It was the days of records and of the difficulties of imports. I liked Warwick's elegant ballads and Ross's disco tracks. "I'm coming out." For sure, I did not know what the lyrics meant, but I liked the joy. Without being able to see *Saturday Night Fever*, I imitated John Travolta's moves. Forbidden for those under 16, or was it 14? I only saw the film years later in an afternoon screening, without the magic it had had. I continued liking the record. "Dance well, dance poorly, dance without stop, without knowing how to stop!" (As Frenéticas).[11] It was a hymn of liberty for the shy, studious young boy. Other times, so many changes, but this music did not change. I still remember the voice of Gal Costa singing: "You are no longer worth anything, you are a turned-over page, discarded from my book." I, who created imaginary friends and masturbated looking at Robin on the Batman and Robin cartoons, how could I reject someone? Then came the dark era. Siouxsie and her Brazilian version, Marielle, from Arte no Escuro. Why do divas seem more interesting when we can't see them or they are in the past? Marielle, so small on the stage. Siouxsie looked so ungainly in the recording of the show *Nocturne*, when seen years afterward. I used to like them because I wasn't like them, but their energy, their eccentricity, made me accept who I am, or better, gave me the strength to accept my difference. Divas are also fragile, androgynous men, gays. The affected Morrissey, covered with flowers in the video for "The Boy with the Thorn in His Side," when he still belonged to the Smiths, or dancing in a desert in "November Spawned a Monster," later during his solo career. The fragile, ethereal voice

11. As Frenéticas were an all-female, six-member Brazilian vocal group that appeared in 1976 in Rio de Janeiro during the heyday of discotheques.

of Robert Smith, the vocalist of the Cure, singing "Charlotte Sometimes," the romantic diva, lost in dreams, from a different time. Then came David Bowie, with all his transformations, a stylish freak (Gutman and Thomson 1993). I rediscovered a different 1970s. Later, Bryan Ferry, no longer part of Roxy Music, eternal elegance, as I would later see in Sade and Duran Duran. Fashion as a type of ethereal beauty, seductive music, chic soul, a soft pain. There was also Madonna, Marina, Björk, certainly others.[iv] There were films with arrogant but good-hearted stars, with memorable quotes. There were the poems of Florbela Espanca,[12] read during movie afternoons, and the first cigarettes, smoked in secret, in the gardens of the Conjunto Nacional shopping mall. Even the raging verses of Rosalía de Castro, heard in a scene of *Wuthering Heights*, the film, or in *Gone with the Wind*: "I shall not take care of the rose plants he left, or of the pigeons: let them dry as I dry; let them die as I die." How I wanted someone like that to hate, to love, and to die for! Mrs Dalloway, lost in the London traffic, alone at high sea. But who is also, at the end, within sight of the person she loves. "For there she was." All of these characters make me remember an article by Richard Dyer about Judy Garland and gay men. The drag queen of the epigraph who places in Garland her mark of exclusion and her strength: "I had rejection from all of them. I also had Judy Garland" (1987, 41). And Vito Russo, the author of *The Celluloid Closet*, a book about the history of homosexuality in cinema, saying he learned how to be gay with her. The joy of music can overcome the defect of alienation of any and all diversion, of all involvement, that should be suffocated by intellectual distancing, to not be accused of being naive, escapist, conformist, or fascist. Ultimately, the pleasure of crying and laughing in the cinema, without any explanation. Shakespeare's motto (*The Tempest*), as well as Vincente Minnelli's (*The Band Wagon*, 1953), "The whole world's a stage," would be updated in the great "Life is a cabaret" (*Cabaret*, Bob Fosse, 1972). Don't you want to join us? Now, it seems that another time slowly appears. I hope there are always divas. But I don't wish to be effaced by these permanent spectacles. Now I am a star.

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12. Florbela Espanca was a Portuguese poet born in 1894 who died in 1930. A precursor of the feminist movement in Portugal, she had a tumultuous and eventful life that shaped her love, erotic, and feminine writings.

20

Everyone notices her when she passes even if they don't want to. I always stay quiet in my corner. Fantastic and imaginary stories happen to her. The beauty and the weight of the quotidian are my lot. She speaks, even when she writes. I write, even when I speak. She likes rash positions, unquestionable truths, even if she soon forgets them. I live with a pain, constantly. Depending on where and when they see us, not everyone perceives what one has to do with the other, who is who. When I write these phrases, every time I have more doubts about whom I am speaking about when I say she or I.

Translated from the Portuguese by Raquel Parrine, Lauren Darnell, and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes

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NOTES

i. I use the term *travesti* in a wide sense, but it would be interesting to remember the difference between transsexual, *travesti*, and *transformista* (drag queen). They all entail crossing the borders between masculine and feminine. Transsexuals feel themselves to be a man or a woman, wish to cross the border in a radical way, even partaking of sex change operations. *Travestis* live 24 hours a day as *travestis*; they carry in their own bodies the ambiguities of masculinity and femininity and, above all those who work in prostitution, do not have a sex change operation. Now *transformistas*, in a long tradition in the theater and in the world of entertainment, such as drag queens, simply engage in the exchange of gender roles for work purposes, during a certain period of the day, not recurring to the use of hormones or other surgical procedures. It is clear that this division is not static and that there can be a movement from one to another. For more details, see Oliveira (1994, 38–48).

ii. See Wilkins (1996), Norbury (1994), Chermayeff et al. (1995), Fleisher (1996).

iii. For research on cross-dressing and autobiography, see Pat Califia (1997) and Maria Consuelo Cunha Campos (1999).

iv. There is an intense scholarly production about Madonna, ranging from the work of fans and anti-fans, such as *I Love Madonna* and *I Hate Madonna*, to the commentary of Camille Paglia (1993) and several anthologies (Schwichtenberg 1993; Frank and Smith 1993; Robertson 1996).

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POLY-, AMBI-

NAOMI MULVIHILL

I'm writing a book where there's a blessing for each thing,
even Shredded Wheat, even an earthquake.

When I try to figure it out, silence snows me in.

On a song, there's a bird in the yard
that won't decide. Mocks them all—gull,

jay, car alarm. There's the man who leaps off a cliff

in a wingsuit and a mole that hunts the dunes
by seismic cues.

As fast as a path opens ahead, the sand collapses.

Tiny stranger, alien multitude—the only baby I ever made
came at the end

of the third month. Outside the first blades of grass

vent themselves along cracks in the asphalt.
Under a privet, violets condense

in the shadows' overlap. *Matter and its absence,*

the bird sings. Bless the unknowable. Bless the implausible.
Bless the ambivalent.

ELEA

DAVID KUTZ-MARKS

Living at the top of the toe of Italy,
it was natural to believe that there was just one thing.
The Tyrrhenian Sea stretched out all around you.
It was full of salt and angry.
Birds came now in some months, subsisting on fish.
Who's to say which to prefer? We no longer
had this question. There was just one girl
who doubled as the moon and the church and the bell
and the god and the cattle. Good thing,
one says, petting oneself, consoling one's neighbor
the only way one knows how,
which is the same way, the same wind,
the dot dot smile and the dot eyes,
the cheap kohl eyebrows where there were none,
the cute arms of bare twigs a bird
lands on now and then, it must be winter again
and they're on their way to the center.

AGAINST QUIRKY WRITING

JOE SACKSTEDER

No, not Gertrude Stein. Samuel Beckett—I'm not talking about him either. Its practitioners might cite Ron Silliman's "The New Sentence" or Viktor Shklovsky's writings on defamiliarization or Garielle Lutz's lecture "The Sentence Is a Lonely Place"; these folks are all involved in what I'm here to critique, but they are not my targets. Melvin B. Tolson—no—James Joyce—not even a little bit—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha—try again—Frank Kuenstler—nada. My target: the conservative watering-down of these writers' techniques largely by now middle-aged writers who cut their teeth in or adjacent to the alt lit scene and the indie publishing boon of the aughts. Writers who want their weird language and their story, too, and who gesture toward this surface-level experimentation by way of basically one maneuver: wrenching a word from one part of speech into another. The most insufferable example is using an adjective as a noun without putting an article in front of it or a suffix like *-ness* after it.[1] This practice is also beloved by marketers of giant corporations who hope to come across as less threatening by feigning the stupidity they ascribe to their consumers—"give the gift of happy." Okay, there's one more big maneuver: a Mad Libs approach to prose by which they substitute for certain unlucky words a synonym that's not really a synonym. Sometimes there's a neologism or an article that gets dropped or added for the sake of profundity, but that's it. Those are pretty much their moves.

1. Nominalization of an adjective produced through zero derivation, itself a common occurrence in English.

* * *

I arrive at the Water Street site, soon to be a house. A house not yet fit for sleep, a day already pried open and spilling its contents. // Inside, a liability of workers huddle aside the stairwall, betokening some grievous manglement. I rush my heart but enter only the amaze of a colleague's fresh handiwork. // Halvard, chisel-handed, has squalled some birch design in defiance of all prints, blue or otherwise, all estimates, budgeted or kindred. // "Gouge!" I mean to swear but spit instead. Confuse them aside to assess the dammit. // It spins before swum eyes, a sequence of parallel fluted narrows above a further gnawed violence of terraced checkerboard gorings like when one wants to farm on a hillside. I lean back, a tourist of sunsets through redrock arches fifteen hundred feet above a bouldrous miscalculation of dead landscape. As quick I'm sucked in and see three-fifths of what I'd gauged manual is the woodgrain's own speech. Halvard having co-authored the gaffe with a plant's own corpse, emerging a script so crimpt the director will never finish his jungle fever dream. A spell, I realize and speak aloud. A how-to for never having noticed. Blueprint for the end of them.

* * *

I have a problem: I worry that we're losing the ability to see a text as experimental unless it's experimental on the line level.

This type of writing does not have a name. A misnomer might be "language writing" or the equally redundant "sentence writing." Language-intensive, sentence-centered, etc. It often rubs elbows with Gordon Lish and Dean Young, with the idea that every line or sentence must stand on its own.

It's a style and a problem born from the ways in which technology has changed how we write, how we read, and how we teach the two practices—but, even more so, how we submit writing and how it's vetted, quirky writing less a conscious aesthetic choice than a reflex, a consequence of the increasingly wide gulf between the things that are easy and the things that are difficult about being a writer these days. It's hard to get a book published, or even a short story in a literary journal, in part because the act itself

of typing words and submitting them online is so very simple and convenient. Add to this a million MFA programs, and the glut of strong writing and talented writers out there verges on the mathematical sublime. There are fewer people writing experimental literature, but there are also fewer people reading it and fewer places to submit it. The primary outlets for writers of innovative work are independent and university-based journals and presses, most of which operate on thin to zero resources. Readers are often volunteering their time while taking a full load of courses and trying to get their own work out into the world. Submission guidelines for other journals might indeed be some of the twenty tabs open on their browsers as they read for their venue, their capacity for sustained focus long gone. No wonder that they might only look at a submission for a minute or two before rejecting it. In such a situation, the benefit of quirky writing is that it immediately announces itself as strange. A story, conversely, that begins in a more conventional way and gradually escalates its strangeness is going to be a harder sell.

The chances of quirkily written pieces finding success are increased further by their tendency to take very short forms, often inhabiting the gray area of flash fiction / prose poetry. It's hard not to be suspicious that it has something to do with the difficulty of sustaining such syntactic gymnastics over broader stretches. The longer quirky writing persists in asking us to be surprised by its moves, the more that it can start to reveal itself as a string of one-liners—and the more that the experimental claims of the text can begin to feel wholly superficial, too little thought given to the narrative occasion that has called upon such idiosyncrasy. It's also no accident that quirky writing loves fairy tales, that it has assimilated the work done by fairy tale revisionists of the 1960s such as Anne Sexton and Robert Coover. With such revisionism, the story and readers' familiarity with it act as a prefabricated arc upon which the language can be smeared, like papier-mâché on a skeleton of chicken wire. This described situation creates a feedback loop in which the busyness of contemporary existence, the internet's many lures and demands, and the immediacy of quirky language are inextricably entwined. The more that aspiring writers read these excited little pills, the more they submit and the more that this style passes for publishable experimentation these days. Stories have a tendency to take on the qualities of their sentences on a larger level, quirky ones so often reading as assemblages

of mismatched parts, inadvertent picaresques. Their plot arcs are often simply one-thing-after-another with the result that they just stop on the last page rather than end.

* * *

Lunch cracked open a day's feints at progress, the crew plays with food. Ragnar allowing in only what stuffs he could nudge along the inside slick of pink and behind the holes of molars. Knut combing Jesus for pictures of food: grilled cheese, pancakes, tea leaves, entrails. Kaia chewing each bit so many times the bolus just is gone with no swallow. Halvard drinking Coke Zero. Hilda yielding only to what thrown bits go missed by a circling ineptitude of gulls. Aline and Doc passing a pickle back and forth for "most tastes."

Back in vans, break itself broken, Knut drawls, "THESE SIGNS EAT HONEY?" // "It's very clever," I aye, eyes roadside. // "Another. REPENT AND BE SAVED." // "This line of drive-by signs / are only good for one lousy rhyme," I try. // "What do words amount to? Yours? That sign and the other sign and I think a third?" // His glyphs, they glitch even as they say. // Feet swing in blue sky from ladders bungeed to roof racks. // "You read them sequentially. That's how they make sense." // "THESE . . . SIGNS . . . EAT . . . HONEY." // "The signs the *signs*, not the *words* the signs:

"THESE SIGNS EAT LOCUST
THESE SIGNS EAT HONEY
PREPARING THE WAY
FOR THE SECOND COMING
REPENT AND BE SAVED"

"My sign was briefer." // "Five signs, read one after the other." // "What if you don't encounter them in order?" // "You have to. You drive by them." // "What if you were on foot, raised away from all trending slang, emergent through a scree of trees, and the one sign was humanity's first hail?"

* * *

Quirky writers like to (1) borrow flat characterization from the fairy tale genre so as not to distract from the language, often withholding characters' names; (2) jolt that archetypal approach with the sudden appearance of product names and pop culture references; (3) lean into the inelegance of syntactic constructions that we often avoid, such as consecutive homophones, homonyms, comma splices, or *-ing* words; (4) italicize words for no other emphasis than their extra quirkiness; (5) give readers a singular noun where we would expect a plural one, or vice versa, again for profundity; (6) put words side-by-side just because they share lots of letters; (7) go bonkers with synaesthesia, rendering tangible things intangible and vice versa, especially language itself; (8) disrupt the parallel structure that often helps us navigate sentence fragments and lists like this one; (9) use vagueness deliberately, lavishing in *some*, *somehow*, *somewhere*, and *something*; (10) likewise, string together anaphors of *some*_____ and *this*_____ phrases; (11) visit plagues upon their built words, the flimsiest and most default way of suggesting a diegetic impetus for the quirky language; (12) veer away from their quirkiness with abrupt, unadorned plainspokenness or Valley Girl tics or strangely antiquated language and speech patterns or suddenly precise statistics; (13) insist on puns; (14) go full glossolalia at some point during a text; (15) believe the names of collective animals in the wild to be the most magically novel thing ever, aspiring to strew the strangeness of calling a flock of starlings a *murmuration* across their descriptions of everything in existence; and (16) see if they can out-ridiculous Cormac McCarthy's penchant for incongruous compound words—"dogshadow," "freshkilled," "wretchedlooking," "meatcamp," "halfsordid." In regard to that guy—not a quirky writer but their hero—quirky readers have an amazing capacity to put away their usual skepticism of American myth-making and spectacles of helpless women needing to be saved by violent men if it means they get to read about vagrants who all speak utterly gaseous philosophies in the same archaic voice. If it means they get to read not-at-all ludicrous descriptions like "A howl of such outrage as to stitch a caesura in the pulsebeat of the world," or "the staccato mountains bespoken blue and barren out of the void," or "wrapped in these serapes they looked like God's profoundest peons." Quirky writers get all babydazzled by words like: *gloaming*, *lurch*,

meat, hum, drummed, fluted, coax, proffer, loam, jerk, gnaw, foam, slur, slurry, node, nodule, error, skin, peel, jostle, yawn, maw, ache, suck, loom, hive, ash, curdle, guttural, fray, clot, gape, milk, and *rip* . . . Useful words, all of them, and they benefit from being syllable light and concrete—which quirky writers love interrupting with the sudden awkwardness of a longer, abstract, Latinate clunker.

These days we read literature like we're scanning a product's list of ingredients at the grocery store for something it has recently become fashionable to avoid. In our scene's recent resuscitation of biographical criticism—the death of "The Death of the Author" that is identity and representation—quirky writing has taken advantage of the fact that it's become charmingly antiquated, sophomoric, and beside the point to critique a novel or story or poem due to something related to style or, generally, aesthetics. Perhaps quirky writing's chief characteristic and goal is that it's unassailable (he writes, while assailing it), not because it's difficult to understand per se, but because it's willfully unspecific and detached from the kinds of issues that get readers hot and get writers cancelled.

* * *

> Before, we'd shuddered into cleanup 30 minutes or 37 minutes before the workday itself was plump for auger. Night is preferred to work though night doesn't pay for most. In night, we can turn on breaking news. We can resign ourselves to food that isn't also work. We can scrub gray skin its birth color or close, dig grout from under nails with nails with pulverized volcano. We can kiss and sometimes fuck our wives and boyfriends. We can make our children more like us and fail because. We can strip naked in switched-off showers to funnel filth into the domestic zone most likely to clean itself. We can fist dog shit in what today held brussels sprouts eaten tonight. We can calculate just how much of that day's night erased that day's day, turned tomorrow red, the month red, the year. We can spurt and chew and flush and smack and dose and dream and stub and binge and tweeze. // So it was often an air of jocund did descend upon the boys at the sounding of cleanup. But as of late, ever since Halvard had vouchsafed his remaining days to five square feet of stairwall woodwork, cleanup had been assaulting those previously forward chunks of day.

I come bearing trayed slurries that disguise as optimism the need to piss. It is one morning. I am late, but just. I find: the crew packing it in for the day. Perhaps, I ration, the cycles of constructive strewing and necessary penance no longer fit snugly within a day's container, yesterday's forgotten session phasing into today's spillage. // In pairs they've staked archeological digs bent on minute pains. Halvard and Ragnar stitch snags flat in butcher paper. Doc and Knut parachute scabrous drop cloths into flagged shards fit for war widows. Hilda and Kaia and Aline on knees take toothbrushes and scissors to the furry gutter where sheetrock fails to run just flush with hardwood. Molding and shoe molding and caulk will cover upon cover upon cover this jagged wound of hurry—but I get it. // I grab a brush and get on knees. If not for us, dust would stow itself in that depth as long as Water Street mimed shelter, security. That's why it's called molding. Screams. Lightless.

* * *

I don't call it quirky writing when I talk about it in the classroom, because I don't want to feel any more embarrassed than the writing itself makes me. I find myself most often making use of the term *catachresis*—though many of the described moves fall well outside what is not really an umbrella term, some of them closer to the rhetorical figure *metalepsis*. From the Greek for "misuse," *catachresis* started off as a term relatively synonymous with the later *malapropism*. Some writers define it broadly as mixed metaphor or misnomer, perhaps taking it a step further to refer to excess—extra-textual—meaning created by the use of an unusual—"wrong," often metaphoric—word or phrase. The most specific definition, found in texts like Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, is for the use of figurative language that describes something that does not otherwise have a name. He points out that the word *beauty* can't be defined but can only be metaphorized by reference "to an infinity of codes." Beauty always just denotes itself, or it must tumble into a metaphor, beautiful as _____ (cue the blazon). "There is one rhetorical figure," he adds, "which fills this blank in the object of comparison whose existence is altogether transferred to the language of the object to which it is compared: catachresis." The examples he gives—"wings" of a house, "arms" of a chair—are, in a sense, incorrect. They aren't wings or arms, but there's nothing else to call them. They are "instantly, already metaphorical."

I would not write an essay called "Against Catachresis," nor would I wish to join a lineage of conservative thinkers who mistrust figurative language itself, the targets of Jacques Derrida's 1974 essay on catachresis, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy." I have no desire to ignore some decades of deconstruction and yearn for texts that are smooth and unperforated. I just think that texts can make use of the illusoriness of wholeness in ways more complex than constantly startling us. What I particularly like about *catachresis* is how the variety of its uses has caused the term to perform itself in the moment of its utterance, the contranymic journey it has taken from *That's not the right word* to *There is no right word* to *Any word will do*. I admit I also use it as half-mockery. It's what quirky writers think they're doing, when more often the way they treat as ineffable the extremely fucking effable is an affront to texts that would survey true depths.

Defamiliarization is the most basic way to describe the effects of quirky writing. In his famous 1917 essay "Art as Technique," after quoting a passage in which Leo Tolstoy does not remember whether or not he has just dusted his couch, Viktor Shklovsky slips a sentence into his generally academic-sounding essay that could have been plucked from a quirky writer: "Habituation devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war." He gives us three things that customarily coexist in the same general context so that we start thinking *etcetera*, so that we get habituated to the list itself; then he performs the defamiliarization that is the sudden raising of the stakes with "one's wife" and "the fear of war." It's simply an astonishing moment in the history of writing.

There are lots of different kinds of defamiliarization, but two types have emerged in the years between 1917 and now that are generally what we're talking about when we're talking about defamiliarization. The first involves descriptions of humans and human activities and human structures in terms that feign a lack of familiarity with our customs and history as a species. The second type is basically anything that shocks us out of mindlessly going through the motions so that we are made to notice the world around us. For Shklovsky that means art, especially the difference between what he calls "poetic speech" and "ordinary speech." He praises the former as "difficult, roughened, impeded language" (catachresis, among other tropes) and derides the latter as "economical, easy, proper." "A work is

created 'artistically' so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception"—art slows us down, whereas entertainment sweeps us away, causing us to forget the medium between us and the story.

Both types of defamiliarization are discussed in "Art as Technique," and both techniques are beloved by quirky writers. They delight, in particular, in using anatomical or merely blunt terms to describe the human body and its actions, awakening readers to the grotesqueness of our very corporeality. You might not be *reading* my essay but might rather be *coaxing it into your skull*. Actions are also sometimes rendered in a procedural manner, bodily functions and sensory perceptions and unconscious movements described as if they were products of deliberation, which gives rise to a spasmodic rhythm and depicts the living thing as a clownish accumulation of the verbs it does. The described grotesqueness of bodies and actions in quirky texts is performed by our reading process and the very saccades of our eyeballs—as we try to figure out how *that* part of speech fits into *that* syntactic slot or as we cringe at yet another blunt cleverness.

* * *

> Halvard wheels inside the eye of Water Street, rotates in glitchy jerks, barking orders ignored by others working their own worlds. Kaia mosaics a backsplash of what facets the earth still yields. Doc, with mud and tiny polygons of drywall, bevels a corner to throw back his song as shower. Hilda wroughts iron railings into stalactites, stalagmites that pillar by mere millimeters. The gutters, too, are no good now. With drops of strewn blood has Halvard urged ants into his stairwall trenches, fashioned hinged boxes ants can open to store their eggs or others'. Knut has shaped spiky foam cones from insulation to line the walls of a walk-in where he can be found, most weathers, listening to a low hum, a high whine—his own nervous system, his juice in circulation loudened by the anechoic chamber. Aline went in search of "the basement's basement," chamber after fabled chamber down to the locus, the bottom, and that was coughs ago. I wait for her in the dark, painting on pocked concrete, my medium mold, mold its own process. // One minute or less per day, never in tandem, we step

back, dispel, see: no home here. No home fit for families. In the space between each inspired reckoning, an aesthetic spike to congruency, an all-encompassing tired.

* * *

More than one student has suggested I marry defamiliarization. I'm unsarcastically grateful that Barthes made reading a Balzac story take the rest of my life. And I particularly approve of writers whose attacks on the atrocities of normativity are registered on a language level. What I want is for people to recognize that line-level defamiliarization has become such a default signifier of experimentation that it risks preventing the contemporary avant-garde from considering the possibility that other approaches exist. I'm talking in particular about ones that unfold on a larger scale, effects that build gradually over time until readers are led to a place they didn't know they were going. It's not about assigning any value at all to the length of a book; it's about how a literary endeavor might exhibit a sort of stamina, energy rather than excitement.

In *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), G. E. Lessing mocks writers' attempts to "paint with words," to, for example, describe the beauty of an Alpine landscape. We can take in a painting or the landscape itself in one global instant, but writing moves "with perceptible slowness." Poetry, then, is more appropriate for depicting not bodies in space, but actions in time. As a critique of painting with words, Lessing's argument strikes me as apt and also hilarious. But there are different degrees of slowness in writing and in reading, and I'm not sure that I agree with interpretations of Shklovsky which emphasize that art must solely slow us down, that a faster text is by extension bound up with the crasser status of "entertainment."

What if there are properties of a text, experimental properties, that can only be viewed at a sprint? Not only via that accrual effect over many pages but also on a phenomenological level, the way a word on page 147 lights up a sympathetic image on page 12 of the nodal switchboards that are our reading brains.

A text that punches along by heavily accented lines à la Garielle Lutz's lonely sentences or that mostly tightens its aperture to clusters of three like

Ron Silliman's new sentences or that enacts the continuous "comic pratfalls" of Sianne Ngai's "stuplime" sentences not only inhibits the virtuosic pattern-making capacities of our minds but voids some measure of its own ability to vary and control momentum. We've been well trained—any influence from page-turning entertainment countered by academia's mania for quotations and close reading, causing us as a reading species to squint, forget we can gaze, take it all in. "What . . . shape is this story?" we as teachers half-ass a commitment to the macro-level, having presented our students with yet another shapeless mass (one that definitely succeeded in not being mistaken for a pyramid), tacitly begging them to save us from our current situation.

One text that's highly sensitive to what both speed and the varying of readerly momentum can add to the experiencing of avant-garde art is Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*. Even as the text itself is notoriously difficult, the innovative approach to typographic layout and excessive use of white space cause our eyes to tumble down the page, as if our focus is being rolled like the titular dice. The poem's multicursorality—"A ROLL OF THE DICE WILL NEVER ABOLISH CHANCE" spaced out over sixteen pages with much intervening text—means that too plodding of an approach would decrease a reader's chances of divining that and other textual courses and their potential meanings. Mallarmé alludes to as much in the poem's tough opening preface:

> The literary advantage . . . of this copied distance, which mentally separates groups of words or single words from each other, is that it seems to sometimes accelerate and slow the movement, articulating it, even intimating it through a simultaneous vision of the Page: when considered as a whole, as is the Verse or perfect line elsewhere. The fiction will flow and evaporate, swiftly, according to the mobility of the writing, around the fragmentary interruptions of a capitalized phrase introduced as the title and then continued.

While actual simultaneity is impossible in the medium of literature, the concrete aspects of Mallarmé's pages impart a visuality that partakes *some measure* of pictorial "speed." Since *Un coup de dés* is still words on a page, however, speed simply has a bearing on our abilities to assemble this gestalt. The longer in the assembly, the less unified a retrospective picture.

Mallarmé also describes his project in relation to music, his poem a musical score for oral delivery, the "meeting" of free verse and prose poetry "actualized under a foreign influence . . . that of Music heard at a concert." Music, unlike literature, is tied inextricably to time. It's hard for me to imagine much of a relationship between music and the writing that hovers around my essay's critique, aside from the novice approach that is alliteration and assonance and sprung rhythm. If music can even be artistic by way of Shklovsky's description of art versus entertainment, it would have to be *slow* by some connotation of that adjective unrelated to temporality. In the creative writing world, I feel like we've failed to realize that, have taken *slow* too literally.

Pamela Lu's 2011 novel *Ambient Parking Lot* propels readers over its sentences and narrative in a way that is wholly appropriate given that it is about, among many other things, automobiles and music. Told in first-person plural, it tracks the oscillating successes and failures of a group called the Ambient Parkers who record parking lots, parking garages, and other urban spaces. Its narrative vehicle a vehicle, *Ambient Parking Lot* burns through a novel's worth of plot in the first ten pages, initially leaving me wondering where it could possibly go. Other oscillations provide compelling difficulties not afforded by the prose on a surface level—for example, the Ambient Parkers' investment in the avant-garde and fear of selling out paired with a counterbalancing desire that leads to periods of unlikely glamour and fame, or a love of Americana and urban spaces that's offset by Romantic language and impulses that several times cause them to retreat into nature, their language to tinge purple.

"Scenery that had never made much sense to us on the ground assumed a spectacular logic at sixty-five-plus miles per hour," is how the speaker describes the sense of intoxication when the group buys a car, becoming motorized flâneurs.

> The world was full of texts meant for zooming giants, and we pitied the poor souls who were condemned to navigate this baffling vastness on foot. The walkers were illiterate but content, stumbling past fragments of meaning without care or comprehension. We, on the other hand, were speed-readers of the landscape, subject to the simultaneous rapture and burden of our gift.

The Parkers and this passage are much more than a satire of Futurism; the text's momentum, especially its interplay between brevity and verboseness, is a big part of its humor, allowing it to build and build and arrive at sudden pitches where we're halted and made to understand the complexities to which our very act of reading has been contributing. For example, the Parkers' attempts to attract the attention of a hip and esteemed pirate radio station master culminate in a reply email that runs fifty book pages, a picaresque of his escape from being a kept man in the parlor of an aging opera diva to his own quest for enlightenment under the tutelage of a guru at the ends of the earth who is referred to simply as the Conductor, ending with his return to Los Angeles, to cars, to Coke, to a fight between a mechanical sloth and saber-toothed tiger at the La Brea Tar Pits that provides this significant digression in the novel with a shaggy dog punch line of a burn: "With motorized precision, the models slide back to their starting positions. This is perhaps the strangest and most heart-wrenching part of the program, and it is this industrious backsliding, complete with the creaking wheels of machinery concealed beneath the fur, that reminds me indelibly of your music."

Ambient Parking Lot is knowingly a simulation of a novel as much as anything else, and the Parkers are a charming version of the famously excitable art school friend who is constantly changing their image to suit the latest epiphany, such that another way of looking at the structuring device of the novel is not just via the car but via the group as a Protean manifestation of the last two centuries of art, in particular the exponential branching of artistic movements and sub-movements of modernism—a reading reinforced by a scene in which the Ambient Parkers find themselves subject to a presentation by a group of academics on the "Arc of Cultural Production" and readers see the novel's riotous froth of aesthetics replayed over the course of just one page. This is what makes one easy-to-miss moment near the end of the novel so funny, when, in reply to an interviewer's queries, a Parker asks, "Are you saying you'd like us to sharpen our ideological stance?" (*No!!!*) It's what makes it so loaded and devastating when the novel gives a mere handful of sentences to a 9/11-style terrorist attack and subsequent parody of Bush-era wars. All in one sentence: "Over the next eighteen months, we were flooded with media images showing the impact of retaliatory airstrikes and

a coordinated ground campaign on so-called enemy soil." *Ambient Parking Lot* is also a book that benefits from close reading, and it's not necessarily the *speed* of the novel that I want to emphasize, but rather how its jargony but relatively smooth sentences don't just make way for but are a necessary aspect of strangenesses that are themselves strange.

* * *

> One day a family appears. The family. It is a woman, her husband, a girl, an older girl. *Closed* is all they can hiss, and we think they mean the Water Street house—to them. But, no, the family closed on their old home, have nowhere to mull. This job: months past projections, eons until the wrongest end. // Any anger they might choreograph is dazzled straight silent by how their new home knocks and chafes what they'd been mislabeling their whole lives a wall, a tub, breakfast nook, hair gel. Moneyed enough to straight-up build a whole-ass house, they fret over cancel culture, getting PWNed. // The girls go by day to school or drugs. The wife points and points, wordless, hems plus haws. Daddy draws vectors, new figures with what supplies we angle angry, deduct from fuck-all. // Aline comes back but she's off, a different Aline. Joe, who has been here the whole time, is curled into a ball in yon corner, muttering to himself and legit disappearing. So diligent and artless as to escape notice, he had long since stopped cringing at our many errancies, bequeathing—caulk-gunned on sheetrock opposite my blooming mold garden—a malediction that begins *No, not Gertrude Stein*. Some veined mass grows where they intended a yard. We shift the family around the room to dodge wires, collect them for what spans they will bear into workless chambers. // At cleanup, whenever the notion should chuff from vents, we bully them into the room's middle with the worklamps and ladders, tablesaws and nail-guns, sandpaper and paintbuckets, toolbags and our most virile years, wrap the girl and the younger girl and who we're assuming are their parents in tarps until day should require them again alive. // Most nights these days we don't go home to daughters and other halves, bourbon barrel Abilify and doorways wedged with pull-up bars, a book about submarine treasure or a bag of bags. Instead we gape at

these cryptic glyphs, our true names spelled out in stucco, a smearing family. If given a thousand years or more, a single doorstop would persist in baffling us. A socket. A soft close hinge. Bellowing.

And we have a whole house, if that's what this is.

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☐ Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months *(Publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement)*

13. Publication Title	14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below
Michigan Quarterly Review	07/01/2021

15. Extent and Nature of Circulation			Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
a. Total Number of Copies *(Net press run)*			520	500
b. Paid Circulation *(By Mail and Outside the Mail)*	(1)	Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)	375	300
	(2)	Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)	20	31
	(3)	Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS®	34	34
	(4)	Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS (e.g., First-Class Mail®)	35	20
c. Total Paid Distribution *[Sum of 15b (1), (2), (3), and (4)]*			464	385
d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution *(By Mail and Outside the Mail)*	(1)	Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies included on PS Form 3541	0	0
	(2)	Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541	0	0
	(3)	Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS (e.g., First-Class Mail)	0	0
	(4)	Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail *(Carriers or other means)*	30	30
e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution *(Sum of 15d (1), (2), (3) and (4))*			30	30
f. Total Distribution *(Sum of 15c and 15e)*			494	415
g. Copies not Distributed *(See Instructions to Publishers #4 (page #3))*			26	85
h. Total *(Sum of 15f and g)*			520	500
i. Percent Paid *(15c divided by 15f times 100)*			94	93

* If you are claiming electronic copies, go to line 16 on page 3. If you are not claiming electronic copies, skip to line 17 on page 3.

Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation (All Periodicals Publications Except Requester Publications)

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16. Electronic Copy Circulation	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
a. Paid Electronic Copies	20	14
b. Total Paid Print Copies (Line 15c) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a)	484	399
c. Total Print Distribution (Line 15f) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a)	514	429
d. Percent Paid (Both Print & Electronic Copies) (16b divided by 16c × 100)	94	93

☑ **I certify that 50% of all my distributed copies (electronic and print) are paid above a nominal price.**

17. Publication of Statement of Ownership
☑ If the publication is a general publication, publication of this statement is required. Will be printed in the 1/1/22 issue of this publication. ☐ Publication not required.

18. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner

	Date
Hannah Webster, Managing Editor	09/13/2021

I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on the form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including civil penalties).